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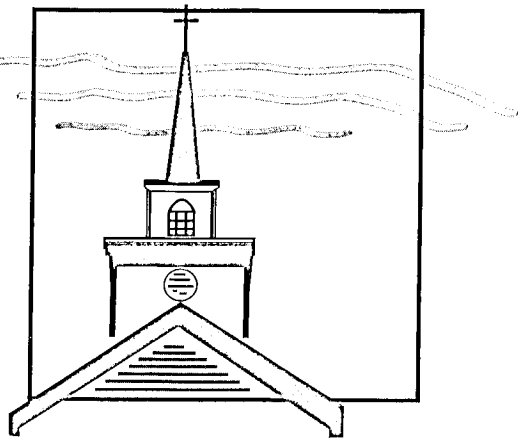
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HAPPY 300TH TO HENRY MELCHIOR MUHLENBERG

Mark Granquist



This year is the celebration of the three-hundredth birth anniversary of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg (1711–1787), one of the most important and influential American Lutherans who ever lived. Colonial American Lutheranism would not have been the same without him. But beyond his historical importance—which was considerable—there is a number of enduring reasons to revisit his life, career, and lasting impact on American Lutheranism. He was a great example of a missional leader of congregations in changing times and contexts who defined a structure and theology for North American Lutherans. This Lutheranism, based essentially on a moderate form of “churchly” Pietism, continues to influence many of the basic patterns of American Lutheranism even today. Muhlenberg’s influence also moved beyond the American Lutheran context as he and his descendants came to play important roles in the formation of the new American republic. And he was simply a fascinating person and leader living in turbulent times.

Muhlenberg was born on September 6, 1711, in Hanover, Germany, the seventh child of an eventual nine. From a young age he showed great academic and religious talents and was educated in the local classical schools when family finances would allow it. With outside financial assistance he entered the University at Göttingen, where he came under the influence of Pietistic friends and teachers, undergoing a conversion experience though apparently a gradual one; he was opposed to the instantaneous variety. He taught briefly at Halle, served as a pastor from 1739 to 1741, and then was commissioned as a missionary by the Pietist leader Gotthilf Francke. Though Muhlenberg’s first desire was to go to India, he was sent instead to several Lutheran congregations near Philadelphia, where he arrived in November of 1742.

What Muhlenberg found upon his arrival in North America was a growing Lutheran population but one that was weakly organized, poorly led, and riddled by disputes. There had already been organized Lutheran congregations in colonial America for at least ninety years, but there was a chronic shortage of pastors, and many of those who were available were incompetent or impostors. For the next

forty-five years, Muhlenberg’s call was primarily to serve these Philadelphia congregations, but in reality his influence expanded to the point where he became the acknowledged leader of most Lutherans in North America. Muhlenberg organized the first synodical organization of American Lutherans in 1748—the ministerium of Pennsylvania—and provided it with a constitution, liturgy, and hymnbook. His direct influence covered Lutheran congregations from New York to Virginia and occasionally as far south as Georgia. He traveled constantly, founding new congregations, maintaining established ones, and frequently arbitrating disputes among and within them.

As leader of the ministerium, Muhlenberg preached in German, Dutch, and English and recruited new pastors from Germany for the scattered Lutheran congregations. He also maintained a strong contact with the Pietist leaders at Halle. His letters and reports to these leaders provide us with invaluable documentary evidence on the history of colonial American Lutheranism. Moreover, Muhlenberg also served as an influential leader for German-Americans in colonial America and became adept in defending Lutheran interests in the tempestuous world of colonial politics, especially during the traumas of the Revolutionary War. Muhlenberg’s sons succeeded him as religious and political leaders in the new American republic, while a dozen of his descendants served as political leaders in Pennsylvania and in the national government.

As a missional leader, Muhlenberg led American Lutheranism through a period of upheavals, leaving it much stronger and more capable for his efforts. He arrived in North America with little direct support or money and initially had to deal with direct opposition from part of his congregation as well as from his pastoral predecessor. The transition to the North American context was very difficult for the Lutherans; accustomed to a monolithic, state-church context, American Lutherans encountered a strange new world of voluntary pluralism and democracy, no state support, and the religious domination of English-speaking Reformed Protestants. Muhlenberg was a key leader in helping American Lutherans adapt to this alien environment and not only adapt but flourish.

Out of his missional vision, informed by his churchly Pietism, Muhlenberg showed a great willingness to work with other American Protestant groups without compromising on the Lutheran confessional identity that was his core. He worked especially closely with other German-American Protestants Reformed, Moravian, and others but also worked with the "English" (as in English-speaking) churches around him. Muhlenberg was also open to new groups and peoples. He knew and advocated for Native Americans and called for the evangelization of enslaved African-Americans. He also provided occasional pastoral services for free to African-Americans in Philadelphia. He was acquainted with many of the colonial religious and political leaders, such as colonial evangelist George Whitefield and Benjamin Franklin.

As Muhlenberg struggled to establish and define his vision of Lutheranism in the American colonies, he had direct competition from three

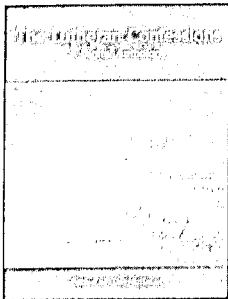
other groups that vied for the religious affections of the German immigrants. In New York and New Jersey, the Lutheran leader was William Berkenmeyer, a German pastor of the Orthodox party, sent to America by the Lutheran church in Hamburg. In Pennsylvania and the middle colonies, there was an established group of German Moravians under the guidance of Count Nicolas Ludwig von Zinzendorf, who made two trips to visit North America. And because of its religious toleration, Pennsylvania was the home to numerous different groups of German Anabaptists and Radical Pietists, including Mennonites, Amish, Dunkers, and Brethren. In a more or less direct fashion, these three groups and their leaders sought to define German-speaking Protestantism in North America.

Berkenmeyer in New York and New Jersey was a strong opponent of Pietism and, of course, of the Dutch Reformed church that still tended to dominate the religious life of these

colonies. When Berkenmeyer arrived in America in 1725, he attempted to expand his influence over all the local Lutheran congregations and their pastors. Berkenmeyer was too rigid in his approach and unable to adapt to the new American context, so he was drawn into numerous battles among local pastors and congregations. Muhlenberg was unwillingly dragged into a number of these conflicts but was often able to bring about resolution where Berkenmeyer could not. Increasingly, Muhlenberg's influence grew among the New York and New Jersey congregations. When Berkenmeyer died in 1751, Muhlenberg faced little competition for control from the other local Lutheran pastors.

The Moravians were competitors to Muhlenberg primarily through the ambition of Zinzendorf, who sought a grand church union of all German-speaking Protestants under his personal guidance. In the 1740s, Zinzendorf made two trips to North America to promote his plans, and when he failed

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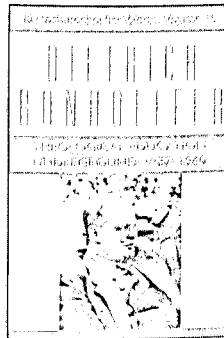
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to push his union plans through, he turned to meddling in local Lutheran congregations, seeking to place Moravian preachers in Lutheran parishes. This was a direct and immediate threat to Muhlenberg when he arrived in 1742, and he worked hard to counter the Moravian influence among the Lutherans, which faded after 1748. In a similar vein but much less organized, the German Radical Pietist and Anabaptist groups also sought to gather immigrant Germans into their congregations away from Muhlenberg's Lutheran congregations.

In all of this, Muhlenberg sought a center position. Against Berkenmeyer's rigid Orthodoxy and inability to adapt to the American context, Muhlenberg established an American Lutheranism that could flourish within a voluntary and pluralistic religious situation. Against Zinzendorf, Muhlenberg held for a moderate Lutheran confessionality that would stand up to a grand ecumenical vision built primarily on experiential religion. And counter to the Radical Pietists and Anabaptists, Muhlenberg opposed sectarian ecclesiology and a faulty understanding of conversion. In a study of Muhlenberg, historian Leonard Riforgiato identified him as the "Missionary of Moderation" who sought a flexible middle way between these three sets of competitors.¹

The Lutheranism that Muhlenberg established in North America was essentially a churchly Pietism, a moderate form of Pietism that sought to work within the confessional boundaries of Lutheranism. Pietism is often attacked by its detractors as inherently enthusiastic, legalistic, and separatistic, but the churchly Pietism of Muhlenberg, following Spener and Francke, was none of these things.

Essentially, this churchly Pietism was built on a foundation of moderate confessional Lutheranism, warmed by a healthy dose of Pietist spirituality. This movement took a broad view of the Christian community and essentially held to a "folk church" understanding of the Christian community. While stressing the Lutheran centrality of justification, it also maintained a parallel sense of sanctification, with an emphasis on a life lived in response to grace. Muhlenberg did hold to the forms of church, Confessions, and sacramental worship, but he opposed the rigid formalism of Berkenmeyer. In his congregations he stressed living a life of personal moral integrity, the duty of all Christians to share the gospel, and the Bible as the central living narrative that informs the Christian life. It was this sense of the church and Christian life, and the ways in which they were formed in the American Lutheran context, that was Muhlenberg's lasting contribution, a contribution that has shaped and directed American Lutheranism over the ensuing centuries.

Muhlenberg attempted to follow a moderate course, directing American Lutheranism between rigid Lutheran Orthodoxy, enthusiastic Moravian ecumenism, and Radical Pietist separatism. His moderate course was a carefully thought out and principled theological position that sought to establish Lutheranism in the North American context, giving the movement the greatest chance for its success. As Riforgiato concludes, "Muhlenberg's Lutheran church remained denominationally distinctive yet open to counterplay and contact with other churches... For Muhlenberg the genuine Church of Christ manifested itself within the various denominations, all

of which retained their doctrinal and liturgical individuality while joining together in a common meditation of God's word."² This was not a blurring of differences between groups or a belief that doctrines and forms are meaningless but rather a way to insist on Lutheran distinctives without closing Lutherans off to the other Christians around them.

Certainly Muhlenberg would be historically important for no other reason than that he played such a huge role in the formation of colonial Lutheranism. But we would miss the larger part of his influence if we were to ignore the critical role that Muhlenberg played in giving American Lutheranism its essential shape. It is very clear that for the two hundred years following his death, American Lutheranism still generally followed the theological and ecclesiastical form laid down by Muhlenberg in late eighteenth-century America. Though there have been groups seeking to establish a pattern slightly different from Muhlenberg's, his example and influence even over these groups has been noticeable and distinctive. As American Lutherans look to their future in a strange new world that seems to be constantly changing and posing new challenges, we could do little better than to study Muhlenberg's theological and ecclesiastical approach as a model for the twenty-first century. *IF*

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Notes

1. Leonard R. Riforgiato, *Missionary of Moderation: Henry Melchior Muhlenberg and the Lutheran Church in English America* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University, 1980).

2. *Ibid.*, 235.