



## Paul Gerhardt: Who He Was and Why We Care

PAUL WESTERMEYER

**P**aul Gerhardt (1607–1676) was born near Wittenberg four hundred years ago this year. He entered the University of Wittenberg in 1628. The Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) seems to have arrested not only German life generally, but Gerhardt's life specifically. Gerhardt was still at Wittenberg in 1642 when he was thirty-five; though he preached in Berlin before then, he was not ordained until 1651 when, at the age of forty-four, he became the pastor of a church in Mittenwalde in the vicinity of Berlin; and he did not marry until 1655, when he was forty-eight.

His life was marked by trouble. In 1637 Swedish soldiers set fire to his hometown of Gräfenhaynches, where his father had been mayor. The Gerhardts' family house, possessions, and church were destroyed. Pulled into the theological squabbles of his day as a pastor in Berlin, his conscience would not allow him to accede to the Calvinist demands of Elector Friedrich Wilhelm. He was removed therefore from his parish in 1666. Three years later he was installed at the church in Lübben an der Spree where he remained among less than supportive people until his death in 1676. Four of his five children died in infancy. His wife died in 1668. His sole surviving son, Paul Friedrich, was six at the time.

*Throughout 2007, Word & World commemorates the four hundredth anniversary of the birth of the great Lutheran hymn writer Paul Gerhardt. Attending to this seventeenth-century preacher and writer can teach us something about how to sing in our own time.*

## GERHARDT'S CONTINUING PRESENCE

These somewhat slow-moving and somber external details of Gerhardt's life do not suggest his importance as a hymn writer—and a rather sunny one!<sup>1</sup> That is how we know him and why we remember the four hundredth anniversary of his birth in 2007. He wrote over a hundred hymns. A number of them still remain in use among us. Eight are in the ELCA's new hymnal, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (hereafter *ELW*),<sup>2</sup> the same number as were in the *Lutheran Service Book and Hymnal*.<sup>3</sup> Nine are in the *Lutheran Book of Worship*,<sup>4</sup> *Lutheran Worship* has seventeen,<sup>5</sup> and *Christian Worship* has eighteen.<sup>6</sup>

Gerhardt's hymns are important not only for Lutherans, but for other Christians as well. A random check of hymnals from the last half of the twentieth century makes that clear. The Evangelical and Reformed Church had eight,<sup>7</sup> Congregationalists had five,<sup>8</sup> Episcopalians have five,<sup>9</sup> and Methodists have four.<sup>10</sup>

All the references so far are to translations for English-speaking bodies in this country. For German Lutherans, using German originals, the number is much higher. There are thirty-three Gerhardt hymns, for example, in the *Evangelisches Kirchen-Gesangbuch*.<sup>11</sup> By any measure all of these numbers are very high. Already in the nineteenth century Philip Schaff estimated that there were over one hundred thousand hymns in German alone.<sup>12</sup> For any single author to have even one hymn in play after three and a half centuries is remarkable, especially a German writer whose words have been translated into English.<sup>13</sup>

## AN INFLUENCE BEYOND NUMBERS

Numbers are important signals when they are viewed across many generations and long stretches of time, but they only hint at Gerhardt's significance. There are more important matters than numbers. Here are several of them.

<sup>1</sup>For an overview of Gerhardt's life and work, see Theodore Brown Hewitt, *Paul Gerhardt as a Hymn Writer and His Influence on English Hymnody* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1918; St. Louis: Concordia, 1976).

<sup>2</sup>*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006).

<sup>3</sup>*Service Book and Hymnal* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1958).

<sup>4</sup>*Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978).

<sup>5</sup>*Lutheran Worship* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1982).

<sup>6</sup>*Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1993).

<sup>7</sup>*The Hymnal* (Saint Louis: Eden, 1941).

<sup>8</sup>*Pilgrim Hymnal* (Boston: Pilgrim, 1958).

<sup>9</sup>*The Hymnal 1982: According to the Use of the Episcopal Church* ((New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1985).

<sup>10</sup>*The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1989).

<sup>11</sup>*Evangelisches Kirchen-Gesangbuch* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlaganstalt, c. 1963).

<sup>12</sup>Philip Schaff, "German Hymnody," in *A Dictionary of Hymnology*, ed. John Julian, 2nd rev. ed. with supplement (New York: Dover, 1957) Vol. 1, 412.

<sup>13</sup>Gerhardt wrote comparatively few German hymns and poems, only 139, which makes the number remaining all the more remarkable. Johann Rist (1606–1667) wrote 659, and Benjamin Schmolck (1672–1737) wrote 1188. See Hewitt, *Paul Gerhardt*, 14.

First, quite apart from the texts themselves, it is worth noting that Gerhardt represents one of the partnerships of text and tune writers, of pastor and musician—not unlike Martin Luther and Johann Walter in the sixteenth century or Jaroslav Vajda and Carl Schalk in the twentieth. Before he was ordained, Gerhardt worked in Berlin as a tutor. Johann Crüger, the cantor at the Nikolaikirche, was among his friends. Crüger introduced Gerhardt's hymns to the public by publishing them in his *Praxis pietatis melica*, the most important hymn collection of the seventeenth century. Beyond that, however, and even more importantly, the two collaborated. Good examples of this collaboration are Gerhardt's texts "Awake, My Heart, with Gladness" and "O Lord, How Shall I Meet You," with the tunes Crüger wrote for them, AUF, AUF, MEIN HERZ and WIE SOLL ICH DICH EMPFANGEN.

That collaboration is not a small thing when one considers how constructive it is and how it counters the liturgical warfare that so easily deforms our life together. But it is not nearly as significant as Gerhardt's hymns themselves. Upon encountering the hymns, one is struck first by the fact that they tell the whole story. Advent is there ("O Lord, How Shall I Meet You," *ELW* #241). So are Christmas ("All My Heart Again Rejoices," *ELW* #273), Lent ("A Lamb Goes Uncomplaining Forth," *ELW* #340), Holy Week ("O Sacred Head, Now Wounded," *ELW* #351), and Easter ("Awake, My Heart, with Gladness," *ELW* #378). So are times, like evening, and the things of the Christian life in a trajectory of grace (as in "Now Rest beneath Night's Shadow," *ELW* #568, or "Evening and Morning," *ELW* #761).<sup>14</sup>

Not only is the whole story there, but Gerhardt knew its christocentric essence. He distilled that into verse. Two things should be noted about that verse. First, it moved from the ruggedness of Luther to a more introspective apprehension, without losing the marks of the faith. He, along with his colleague and tune composer Johann Crüger, wrote smoother and more elegant creations than Luther and his contemporaries. He moved closer to our period, but not toward our period in the sense that he took a poll and then tried to meet the Pandora's box of our needs and wants. The faith itself is always central in his texts.

Second, he did this by writing neither simplistic nursery rhymes nor complex sonnets. Gerhardt had the rare capacity to write public hymns for the community of the baptized who could unconsciously sense that they were "just what we wanted to sing but could not find the words ourselves." So, for example, his hymn "If God My Lord Be for Me" (*ELW* #788) is based on Rom 8. It was stimulated by a sermon Gerhardt heard at a funeral in Berlin in 1651. Its fifteen stanzas run out Paul's ringing affirmation about where we stand in the universe: God is for us. Gerhardt could face down the world's horrors with words like this:

Who clings with resolution  
to God whom evil hates,  
must look for persecution  
which never here abates:

<sup>14</sup>For a list of the themes in Gerhardt's hymns, see Hewitt, *Paul Gerhardt*, 158–160.

reproaches, griefs, and losses,  
rain fast upon your head;  
a thousand plagues and crosses  
become your daily bread.<sup>15</sup>

And then he could immediately sing of God's love in Christ.

All this I am prepared for,  
yet I am not afraid;  
by You shall all be cared for,  
to whom my vows were paid:  
though life and limb it cost me,  
and all the earthly store  
which once so much engrossed me—  
I love You all the more.<sup>16</sup>

James Mearns opines that the central theme of Gerhardt's hymns is the love of God, as opposed to Luther's central theme of grace.<sup>17</sup> He is probably right. The peace and comfort God's love supplies—with the believer's return of love to God (love to neighbor is not missing, but present more by implication)—is critical for Gerhardt, but the explosion of joyful song, as in Luther, is not far away either. Here's the last stanza of "If God My Lord Be for Me." It's where the whole progression leads.

For joy my heart is ringing;  
all sorrow disappears;  
and full of mirth and singing,  
it wipes away all tears.  
The sun that cheers my spirit  
is Jesus Christ, my king;  
The heav'n I shall inherit  
makes me rejoice and sing.<sup>18</sup>

Gerhardt is worth caring about because his hymns are still worth singing and because he has much to teach us. From him we can learn about the faith and how to sing it. If we attend to him, he might even teach us something about how to sing it in our time. ⊕

PAUL WESTERMEYER is professor of church music and director of the Master of Sacred Music program at Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minnesota. He is the author of *Let the People Sing: Hymn Tunes in Perspective* (GIA, 2005).

<sup>15</sup>Richard Massie translation, quoted in C. T. Aufdemberge, *Christian Worship: Handbook* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1997) stanza 11, alt., p. 435.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., stanza 12, alt.

<sup>17</sup>James Mearns, "Gerhardt, Paulus," in Julian, *A Dictionary of Hymnology*, Vol. 1, 409. See also Hewitt, *Paul Gerhardt*, 13.

<sup>18</sup>ELW #788, stanza 4, originally stanza 15.