

Martin Luther, *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God* (1527-1529)

Abstract

While music had long been part of the Christian tradition, it played a new and critical role in the Protestant Reformation. Medieval Catholic music focused on Latin choral music with little lay participation, but Protestants used music as an effective way to spread and reinforce their theology in the vernacular to a largely illiterate community. Hymns proved not only an effective tool for teaching the principles of faith, but also a means of building community and connecting liturgy and Scripture. Luther wrote this hymn, and likely the tune for it as well, “Ein feste Burg is unser Gott,” [A Might Fortress Is Our God] between 1527 and 1529, about a decade into his reform movement. It reflects essential elements of his theology, including salvation by faith alone and the centrality of Scripture. It draws on Psalm 46, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.” It has had an enduring impact on the Protestant tradition and is still sung frequently in church today.

Source

A mighty fortress is our God,
A bulwark never failing;
Our helper He, amid the flood
Of mortal ills prevailing.
For still our ancient foe
Doth seek to work his woe;
His craft and power are great,
And armed with cruel hate,
On earth is not his equal.

Did we in our own strength confide,
Our striving would be losing;
Were not the right Man on our side,
The Man of God's own choosing.
Dost ask who that may be?
Christ Jesus, it is he;
Lord Sabaoth is his name,
From age to age the same,
And He must win the battle.

And though this world, with devils filled,
Should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God hath willed
His truth to triumph through us.
The Prince of Darkness grim,—
We tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure,
For lo! His doom is sure,—
One little word shall fell him.

That word above all earthly powers—

No thanks to them—abideth;
The Spirit and the gifts are ours
Through him who with us sideth.
Let goods and kindred go,
This mortal life also:
The body they may kill:
God's truth abideth still,
His kingdom is for ever.

Source: Michael Praetorius, *Musae Sioniae* 9: Nr. 153 *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*. Lyrics and original melody by Martin Luther, 1527-1529. Performed by Ilse Brix-Meinert, Ferdinand Conrad, and the Bender Children's Choir. Hamburg : Deutsche Grammophon-Gesellschaft, 1955.
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