

This Month in Moravian History

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Johann Christian Bechler

This month marks the 225th anniversary of the birth of the beloved Moravian composer, Johann Christian Bechler, most well-known as the author of the tunes, "Sing Hallelujah, Praise the Lord" and "Christ the Lord, the Lord Most Glorious."

Bechler was born into a pious Moravian family on January 7, 1784, on the island of Oesel in Estonia. From a young age his greatest desire was to become a pastor. After the death of his mother in 1791, his father brought the family to Germany where Johann Christian was enrolled at the Moravian school in Niesky. Plagued by severe homesickness, his first experience at school was a disaster. His spirits revived after a visit from his father, and he went on to become a star pupil. In 1795 he entered the seminary

at Barby where he remained for the next nine years. During this time he developed a particular love of music, devoting every spare minute to learning to sing and play the organ, piano and various stringed instruments.

Bechler graduated from the seminary in 1804, and served the church for 48 fruitful years in Germany, America, Russia, and the Netherlands. Like other Moravian ministers, Bechler's life was marked by

frequent moves. He saved himself considerable stress when he accepted early on that the church "had educated me at considerable expense, in order therefore to employ me in her service for life, as *she* would, not as *I* desired." Bechler was first called as a teacher at Barby, Germany, where he was given the particular task to train organists, and then taught at Nazareth Hall, where he with E. L. Hazellius taught the first class of three pupils at the new "American" Moravian Seminary established in Nazareth in 1806. During his tenure as professor he mastered English, taught music and began composing.

In 1812 he married Augusta Henrietta Cunow, with whom he had several children, although only two sons survived to adulthood. In that same year Bechler was ordained a deacon, and consequently served congregations in Philadelphia, Staten Island, Lititz and Salem before being ordained a bishop in 1835. In 1836 he attended Synod in Germany, after which he served "a very pleasant time" as minister in Sarepta, Russia, for twelve years. After attending Synod again in 1848 he enjoyed a seven-month respite in Zeist, where he then served as minister for four years before retiring to Herrnhut in 1852.

Bechler's memoir emphasizes his devotion to three things: his family, his church calling (of which music was a favorite part), and the Savior. He reportedly worshiped and prayed daily, consulting the Savior on even "the most trivial occasions." His restless mind only found peace when he obeyed Christ's direction. He found that "uninterrupted communion with Christ in the heart" elevated the believer above "all difficulties, distresses and vexations." Bechler died on April 18, 1857, in Herrnhut after enduring four years of blindness and suffering the effects of a stroke.

Images: Portraits of J. C. and A. H. Bechler, originals in Lititz (1957). Sources: *Dienerblätter* and memoir printed in the *Gemeinnachrichten* 1857, p. 545-558, translated in the *Moravian*, June 26, 1857, p. 201-202.

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