



O Christ, Our True and Only Light

Text: Johann Heermann (1585-1647)

Tune: *Nürnbergisches Gesangbuch*, Nürnberg, 1676

During this Epiphany season, many hymns tend to focus on the spread of the Gospel to the Gentile nations. This theme plays heavily in this season because of the arrival of the Magi, which the Church commemorates on the Day of Epiphany, January 6. A focus on missions, the spread of the Gospel to all the world, is not inappropriate in this time of year. We pray for those who do not know the Gospel and those among whom the Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ causes violence and oppression.



Johann Heermann

Johann Heermann was born to a furrier in Silesia on October 11, 1585. He was the fifth—but only surviving—child of his parents. However, early in his childhood he fell gravely ill. His mother vowed that if God healed her only son, she would educate him for the Pastoral Office. She kept her vow, but had to beg to collect the money for his education. He quickly passed through the levels in the educational system, but his ailments followed him. By 1610 his sight was so poor that he had to have full-time care. In 1611 he was made Deacon of Koben, a small town not far from his childhood home. He assumed the post on Ascension Day 1611. By St. Martin's Day (November 11), he was promoted to the Pastorate there. However, by 1623 his health problems were mounting. By 1634 he could no longer preach because he no longer had a voice. He retired in October 1638, moving to Posen, where he died on February 17, 1647.

Much of Heermann's life was spent in the distressing time of the Thirty Years' War. That war, in addition to his own poor health and

personal struggles caused him to write his greatest hymns of comfort. In addition to his own struggles, his town was greatly afflicted as it was destroyed by fire in 1616 and most of its residents were killed by illnesses in 1623. In the midst of this, he published *House and Heart Music*, which contained some of his greatest hymns in the section entitled "Songs of Tears. In the time of the persecution and distress of pious Christians." His hymns are marked by tenderness of feeling, firm faith and confidence in the face of trial, deep love of Christ, and humble submission to the will of God.

When Heermann wrote this hymn, he entitled it "In the Time of Persecution and Distress of Pious Christians." W.E.G. Wackernagel, a commentator on German hymnody, said of this hymn: "When we consider the many kinds of trials, sufferings of body and soul, under which many would have lost courage and given up in despair, then Heermann's hymns will loom up before us among the most exalted of spiritual poems. Here the cries of anguish of thousands...have found an expression which is well-pleasing unto God; they have found the peace of prayer, through communion with the Lord. ... How touchingly Heermann, in this hymn, prays for the enemies of the Church, for the weak, and for the fainthearted! He does not desire the destruction of his enemies, but their repentance and, above all, their salvation."

This hymn is a perfect one for us to sing and pray as we consider the Church's mission in the world. In its six stanzas are excellent images of those who need to hear Christ's saving Gospel. Those who are without the Gospel are those who "sit in night," haunted and blinded by "some dark delusion" brought by an absence of Christ. They are "lost in error's maze," sorely in need of the "radiance of [Christ's] grace." As those separated from Christ go through daily life in a sinful and dying world, their "conscience sore oppressed" seeks peace and healing. Though they seek it in all sorts of means, it is only available from Christ's gentle call in His Word. But we must also remember those who know Christ's light "who dare not yet the faith avow," because they live in areas where the confession of Christ means immediate death. We pray for these, and all others, so that we all may, "with wondering thanks adore" God's love for us shown in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and His Church which spreads this Gospel to all the world.