

Honors to Alexander Mack

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In America today we honor many distinguished persons: former presidents, military heroes, actors and actresses, athletes, and pop singers. We honor them by naming buildings, streets, airports, and cities for them. We inscribe their names on sidewalks in Hollywood or immortalize them in various Halls of Fame.

Religious leaders have also earned places of honor. Stained glass windows in beautiful cathedrals honor many saints of the early church. A monumental wall in Geneva Switzerland honors Protestant Reformers, such as Martin Luther and John Calvin.

In his letter to the Christians in Rome, St. Paul counseled them to give honor to whom honor is due. (Romans 13:7) As the organizer and first minister of the small religious group in Germany who called themselves "New Baptists," Alexander Mack (1679-1735) is one deserving high honors. Today the Brethren Church, the Church of the Brethren, the Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches, and the Old German Baptist Brethren, as well as a number of groups in Asia, Africa and South America -- all trace their denominational origins back to Alexander Mack and a baptismal service of eight persons in the Eder River at Schwarzenau, Germany, in August of 1708.

Mack was born in the obscure agricultural village of Schriesheim, a few miles from Heidelberg, Germany in 1679, more than 300 years ago. His ancestors had been political and religious leaders of the village since their arrival there in 1560. His father was twice mayor of Schriesheim and a successful mill owner. Although Alexander had hoped to attend the University at Heidelberg, the death of an older brother made him a logical heir to the large mill, cutting short his educational aspirations. Schriesheim suffered from successive occupations by invading German and French armies. Three times the Mack family had to flee to nearby hills for safety. Growing up Mack became disillusioned by war and war-making states, and confused by the participation of Christians on both sides of a conflict.

During an era of relative peace, in 1701 Mack and Anna Margaret Kling were married in the village church. Their wedding united two of the most prestigious families of Schriesheim. Ten months later their first child, a son was born. A second son was born to Alexander and Margaret in 1703 and was christened by the pastor in the Reformed Church. This event was the last indication on record of Mack's formal relationship to the institutional church. Although Mack had only a grade school education, he was an avid reader of the Bible and as a young man became increasingly disaffected with the local Reformed Church. He questioned the sterility of the sermons in his church which dealt primarily with academic topics and theological disputes of little interest to him. He was also disillusioned by the immorality of some of the clergymen and the lack of integrity by many lay persons. With many other Christians in other congregations he became part of a revival movement called "Pietism."

With other Christians he believed in the basic tenets of Christianity as given, e.g., in the Apostles Creed. With other Pietists he also firmly believed the following:

- 1 All human beings, even those baptized as infants, are in need of redemption.

- 2 Salvation is possible through faith in Christ; usually in a very intense conversion experience.
- 3 The Bible is the primary authority for all religious questions and is accessible to all Christians.
- 4 Devotional exercises, such as prayer, Bible study and hymn singing, are essential aspects of the Christian life.
- 5 New light may break forth from the Word.
- 6 Religion is fundamentally experiential and emotional -- of the heart not the head.
- 7 All Christians should lead "pious lives," i.e., lives of integrity, humility, and Christian love.

Encouraged by some pastors, but opposed by others, small groups of Pietists would gather in homes for Bible study, prayer, and hymn singing. Although most Pietists continued in relationship to their local congregation, a few, called Separatists, withdrew from the established church and pursued their own spiritual pilgrimage. Mack was one of them. In violation of the law against private religious gatherings, he initiated a small Bible study and prayer group which met in the Mack mill following his father's death.

In 1705, Mack became a close follower of Ernst Christoph Hochmann, a charismatic preacher who would have very little to do with the state church. On August 22, 1706 while Hochmann was leading a religious service in the Mack mill the chief law enforcement officer from Heidelberg broke into the meeting to interrogate the worshippers. The county clerk who accompanied the officer was so angered by this illegal gathering that he threatened to call in a regiment of soldiers to put them all under arrest.

The Mack family had to make a hasty decision -- whether to flee or to remain. They chose to flee. That same night he, his wife, and their two small sons gathered together what possessions they could carry and in the darkness of night fled from Schriesheim. They found refuge in the village of Schwarzenau in the province of Wittgenstein, not far from Marburg. Under the protection of a sympathetic count, many other Separatists had found there a haven of peace and freedom from persecution.

Mack who had a sizable inheritance from his father, shared his wealth unselfishly with those who had fled their homes for religious freedom. Although Mack was only in his twenties, he was highly regarded as a natural leader, and was especially respected for his knowledge of the Bible and his ability to interpret it. He was soon the leader of a small group who met regularly in the Mack home for worship and Bible study. With many other Separatists, Mack believed the following:

- 1 The established churches had become corrupt and were not the true church.
- 2 Many of the congregations did not cultivate a vital relationship with God.
- 3 True Christianity could be found only outside the State churches.

In his use of scriptures Mack emphasized the New Testament and especially the Gospels and the Sermon on the Mount. He was well acquainted with the Mennonites who lived not far from Schriesheim and was very impressed by their emphasis on obedience to the Biblical teachings. During the spring and summer of 1707, Mack and Hochmann traveled together to preach and give encouragement to Pietists living in other areas, even traveling as far as Switzerland. Mack's son, Alexander Mack, Jr., reports that his father also "visited in heartfelt love from time

to time various meetings of the Mennonites in Germany.” These journeys ended when Hochmann was imprisoned at Nuremberg. Mack was now the primary leader of the Pietists in Schwarzenau.

The more Mack studied his Bible and read church histories, the more he was convinced of the following:

- ① The word baptism really means immersion, not sprinkling or pouring.
- ② Baptism is for believers, not infants.
- ③ The New Testament Church was a disciplined community that had clear moral expectations for its members.
- ④ A group of Christians that would be truly Christian should pattern their church on the model of the New Testament Church.

As these understandings became more clear to Mack, the more he felt that the individualism and the spiritualistic (e.g., spirit baptism) approach of Hochmann were not valid interpretations of the scriptures and that the Mennonites were in error by not practicing immersion.

By the spring of 1708 all those who would be the founding members of the New Baptists had arrived in Schwarzenau. In their meetings the question of baptism repeatedly arose. They had all been baptized as infants, yet they did not recognize their own baptisms as legitimate. Rather swiftly they were moving from Pietism to Anabaptism, (rebaptism) represented by the Dutch Collegiants and the Mennonites.

In the early summer of that year two “foreign Brethren“ arrived in Schwarzenau. They strongly urged the Pietists there to be baptized by immersion. Quite likely these were Collegiants whose own practice was immersion, and who encouraged adult baptism.

On July 4th, Mack and another Schwarzenau Pietist carefully composed a letter to Hochmann, requesting his counsel concerning a service of baptism for adults. Writing from prison on July 24th, Hochmann gave his approval for such a ceremony if it followed true repentance and faith. Although he himself did not believe that water baptism was essential, he felt that if God were leading some of his children to be immersed in flowing water as Christ himself had been immersed, he would have no objection. Believing that Hochmann had approved their plans for a baptismal service, the little group of eight decided to proceed with a public baptismal service in the Eder River which flowed through Schwarzenau.

Yet two pressing problems remained. First, what kind of Baptism? The English Baptists immersed once backwards. The Collegiants immersed once forward. After studying some church histories, this group came to the conclusion that the person being baptized should be immersed three times forward in the “name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” From their study of church history they were convinced that “trine immersion had been the practice of the early Christian Church.

The second problem was “Who should do the baptizing?” The group wanted Alexander Mack to officiate. Being a very modest and humble man, Mack did not want any one person to go down in history as the founder of their group and refused. He urged the group to cast lots for one of the others to do the baptizing, with the understanding that that person's name should remain secret.

Early one morning in August, 1708, eight persons gathered at the bank of the Eder River to establish, in Alexander Mack, Jr.'s words, “a covenant of good conscience with God.” One of the group read from Luke 14 about “counting the cost,” which Hochmann had suggested.

Mack was the first one baptized, after which he baptized the others. Following the baptisms the little group had prayers and sang favorite hymns. They dispersed in the full knowledge that in most German states what they had done would have led to heavy fines, imprisonment, or exile.

Some time later Mack composed a hymn entitled "Count Well the Cost." One of the stanzas proclaimed:

*Christ Jesus says, "Count well the cost
When you lay the foundation."
Are you resolved, though all seem lost,
To risk your reputation,
Your self, your wealth, for Christ the lord
As you now give your solemn word?*

Mack was now the minister not of a group of Separatists or a miscellaneous collection of Christians disenchanted with established religion, but of a congregation, a church, the "New Baptists" or "Schwarzenau Baptists" as they called themselves.

They believed that they had been baptized into the church established by Jesus himself and did not perceive of themselves as establishing a new denomination; In a devout attempt to pattern their organization after the New Testament Church, they initiated a re-enactment of the last supper Jesus had with the Apostles, including a meal, a feet-washing service (John 13), and the communion of the bread and the cup. Though Mack was the recognized minister of the newly formed group, they still considered Hochmann as their primary spiritual leaders. However, after his release from prison, he expressed disappointment in what Mack and the others had done and accused them of starting a new denomination. This led to a serious rupture in their relationship. Mack's religious orientation was now very similar to that of the Mennonites. With other Anabaptists, he and his brothers and sisters believed that all the following precepts were clearly taught in the New Testament and patterned their development after them:

- 1 Adult, believers' baptism is valid. Infant baptism is not.
- 2 The New Testament, especially the life and teachings of Jesus, is more relevant to the ethical and spiritual life than is the Old Testament.
- 3 There should be no force in religion.
- 4 Christians should not go to war.
- 5 Christians should not go to law, take the oath, or become government officials.
- 6 The essence of the Christian life is discipleship, i.e., obeying Jesus, following Jesus -- even though it may lead to persecution.
- 7 Secular authorities should not intervene in religious matters. In matters of conscience one must obey God rather than man.
- 8 The Christian congregation should not tolerate immorality. The "ban" (social ostracism) should be used against anyone who, having been baptized, yet "stumbles into sin." The pattern of reconciliation given in Matthew 18 should be carefully followed. If the offender does not repent that person shall be excommunicated.
- 9 Individual responsibility and freedom of the will are assumed, not election or predestination.



Ordination of ministers is by the congregation, not by the state or by an ecclesiastical hierarchy.

The Schwarzenau congregation grew rapidly, becoming a strong cohesive group. Mack led the group through the earliest controversies, and helped them establish a stable style of life which included within its structure opportunity for continuing growth and renewal. It was a simple, communal fellowship.

Although their baptism clearly distinguished them from other religious groups, their Love Feast was just as distinctive. In Mack's house he had a "big room" which was used for the evening service. It began with self-examination, prayer, and the singing of hymns. The men would sit around one table, the women around another. Only those Christians who had been properly immersed were allowed to participate -- those who had "separated themselves from the body of Satan, the world, yes, from all unrighteousness and from all false sects and religions."

After a service of self-examination and penitence, one of the ministers would read from John 13 the story of Jesus washing of the disciples feet. At the close of this reading each man in turn would gird himself with a towel and kneel to wash the feet of another and then had his feet washed as a symbol of true humility and spiritual cleansing. The sisters did likewise.

After a prayer of blessing the group ate in silence a simple meal of bread, broth, and beef, feeling a spirit of unity against the forces of evil which had so often plagued their lives.

After reading the account of Jesus' trial and crucifixion Mack took the unleavened bread in his hands and blessed it. He then broke a piece to give to the one next to him. Each participant did the same. A common goblet was used for the wine. A closing hymn was sung, after which the communicants went out silently into the night. For the next several years Mack became an ardent evangelist for the New Baptists, visiting Pietistic groups in various places, using his considerable persuasive skills. His efforts bore fruit.

Three times he traveled to the Marienborn Area northeast of Frankfurt to perform baptisms, all of which were illegal. A strong congregation was established there, but by 1715 most of them had to flee due to threats of persecution. Some went to Schwarzenau, but most went to Krefeld where the third congregation in Europe was formed.

In a few years a congregation of about 200 was thriving in Schwarzenau. It is quite clear that these New Baptists were deeply spiritual, filled with caring concern for one another. The daughter of the ruling Count Henry described them as a quiet people who "spend their time in Bible study, in prayer, and in deeds of kindness and charity." Count Henry himself called them inoffensive "out of pure desire to lead lives pleasing to God." In 1719 a large portion of the Krefeld congregation migrated to Pennsylvania in search of economic opportunity and religious freedom -- most of them settling in Germantown near Philadelphia.

In Schwarzenau, the threat of persecution was becoming more ominous, and in 1720 the congregation of 200 decided to find a haven of religious freedom in the tiny village of Surhuisterveen in North Holland, where work was available for them in the peat fields. The Mennonite congregation in that village welcomed them and helped them resettle. In September of 1720 a double tragedy struck Mack and his faith community. His dearly loved wife of nineteen years died unexpectedly. Her quiet strength and fortitude had been a major support to Mack through the years, and her death was a grave blow. That loss was compounded shortly afterward by the death of his six-year-old daughter, Christina.

Unfortunately, the peat fields were being rapidly depleted, and the congregation felt the only course for them to take was to follow their brothers and sisters to the New World. In 1729, with the help of Collegiants and Mennonites, Mack led about 100 of them to Rotterdam where they sailed to Philadelphia. The remaining New Baptists in Europe either joined the Mennonites, returned to the state churches, or withdrew from organized religion. The Germantown congregation which had been established by the Krefelder group with Peter Becker as its minister, eagerly welcomed Mack and the new immigrants. Peter Becker and the congregation readily accepted Mack as the new minister of the congregation.

For these German Baptist immigrants the first years in Germantown were intensely fulfilling. Years of harassment and rejection experienced in Europe made the accepting love of the Germantown Brethren and religious freedom incomparable blessings. Economic opportunities in the Germantown area were abundant and the enthusiasm and evangelistic fervor of the settlers soon led to the formation of several new congregations. There was one serious problem, however, that confronted Mack. Conrad Beissel, who had been the minister of the Conestoga congregation repudiated his relationship to the German Baptists shortly before Mack's arrival. This tragically divided the Conestoga congregation and threatened the Germantown congregation as well.

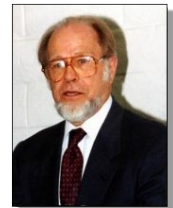
Mack worked diligently for a reconciliation with Beissel, but to no avail. Apparently, though, Beissel had a basic respect for Mack, for as long as Mack was alive he refrained from attacking the German Baptist congregations or seeking to make proselytes. In 1732 Beissel started his own religious group at Ephrata, emphasizing celibacy and the observance of the Seventh Day. The surviving buildings of his community are now known as the Ephrata Cloisters. Although Mack could rejoice in the rapid growth of the various congregations, the insoluble problem of Beissel's defection preyed on Mack's spirit and undermined his health. On February 19, 1735, to the deep sorrow of his brothers and sisters in the faith, Alexander Mack died at his home in Germantown. Sometime before his death, he had said to his sons, "Now when I am gone, don't mark my grave, or they might sometime want to erect a monument...." Mack's sons were distressed and protested to their father. At last Mack agreed to allow them to mark his grave with a small slab.

Mack was buried in a community cemetery which was later abandoned. In 1894 his remains were moved to the cemetery in back of the mother church in Germantown where six generations of his descendants are also buried.

Alexander Mack was a truly humble man, for out of his humility and his own willingness to grow and change, he fashioned the most precious gift he could bequeath his spiritual progeny - a life of committed discipleship to Christ with a willingness to be guided by the Spirit to new understandings of the truth and new expressions of faith. In his latter days Mack must have pondered deeply the drastic changes which had occurred in his own lifetime. As a young man he had made a "covenant of good conscience" with God. During his life time he had counted the cost many times, had fought a good fight, and had remained faithful to his transcendent vision of a supportive Christ-centered community. We, his spiritual heirs, are pleased to honor him, not so much by naming libraries, or camps, or church buildings after him, but by emulating his spirit -- of love not hatred, of peace not conflict, of kindness and forgiveness not vengeance, of wholehearted discipleship to Jesus Christ. We honor him also for his vision of religious freedom and separation of Church and State and for using peaceful, non-violent ways to resolve conflicts. Finally, we honor him for his willingness to "count the cost," and to pay the price of commitment, a price which gave us the heritage we enjoy today.

About the late Author

William G. Willoughby, a graduate of Elizabethtown College and Bethany Theological Seminary, earned his Ph.D. in Philosophy of Religion at Boston University in 1951. His pastorates included the Church of the Brethren in Olympia, Washington, St. Andrews United Methodist Church in Boston, and several interim and part-time pastorates in Brethren churches and one in a Presbyterian congregation. From 1950 to 1962, he taught religion and philosophy courses at Bridgewater College. In 1962, he was asked to set up the Brethren Colleges Abroad program at Marburg, German, and was its first director. From 1963 to 1966, he was director of Brethren Service programs in Europe and North Africa with his office in Geneva, Switzerland. In 1970, he was appointed Professor of Philosophy and Religion and director of Educational Programs in Correctional Institutions at the University of La Verne, from which he



retired in 1982. In 1978, he and his wife, Lena, retraced the steps of Alexander Mack from Schriesheim to Schwarzenau to Surhuisterveen, Holland, to Germantown, Pennsylvania, in preparation for writing a biography of Mack: "*Counting the Cost*," published in 1979 by Brethren Press. For five years, from 1984 to 1989, he and his wife were co-chaplains of Brethren Hillcrest Homes in La Verne, California. He also translated the biography of Ernest Christoph Hochmann von Hochenau, Alexander Mack's mentor, which was published by Brethren Encyclopedia, Inc. in 1993. His most recent publication is "*Beliefs of the Early Brethren*," published in 1999 by Brethren Encyclopedia.