

**A MEMORIAL STATEMENT FOR
FRANZ HILDEBRANDT, D.D., Ph.D., Lic. Theol. (1909-1985)**

FRANK BAKER

His many friends in many countries mourn the passing of Franz Hildebrandt, a faithful pastor and a great scholar, who died in Edinburgh on November 25, 1985. To the writer he was an admired colleague and beloved friend for forty years.

Born in Berlin in 1909, Franz Hildebrandt was educated at the Universities of Tubingen, Marburg, and Berlin. In 1931 he published at Göttingen in German, *EST, Das Lutherische Prinzip . . . (EST, The Lutheran Principle)*. In 1932 he entered the Lutheran ministry, which he served for fourteen years. From 1934 to 1937 he was Assistant to Pastor Martin Niemöller (1892-1984) at Dahlem, Berlin; as a strong critic of Hitler, Niemöller was committed to concentration camps from 1937-45. Franz Hildebrandt was also a close friend of Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-45), who was executed in a Nazi concentration camp. With others of the Confessional Church in Germany, Pastor Hildebrandt left Berlin for England, where from 1939 to 1946 he was pastor of the German Lutheran refugee congregation in Cambridge. Anonymously he wrote *Pastor Niemöller and his Creed*. He edited "And other Pastors of thy Flock," a German tribute to the Bishop of Chichester (Cambridge University Press, 1942). Other books came from his pen during this early English period: *This is the Message, a continental reply to Charles Raven* (London, Lutterworth Press, [1944]), and *Melancthon: alien or ally?* (Cambridge University Press, 1946).

In 1946 Dr. Hildebrandt was officially accepted as a transfer into the British Methodist ministry, and he continued to serve in the Cambridge area, at Romsey Town, for a further five years. He was then stationed in the Nicolson Square Methodist Church, Edinburgh, for two years. It was in Edinburgh that he wrote *From Luther to Wesley* (London, Lutterworth Press, 1951). It was in this latter year also that he was invited to list details about himself for *Who's Who in the Free Churches*; here he described his special interests as Reformation theology, the Wesley tradition, New Testament theology, the Ecumenical Movement, Christian pacifism, and displaced persons; his sole recreation he noted as music.

In 1953, while he was still at Nicolson Square, Edinburgh, he accepted an invitation from Drew University, Madison, New Jersey, to serve them as Visiting Professor of Christian Theology. Here he quickly made a niche for himself both as a scholar and as a caring pastor. Not only did he secure

permission to conduct devotional sessions in the chapel for students, complete with the singing of (predominantly) Wesley hymns — always insisting on singing every verse — but he also became the volunteer pastor of a small local church.

The following year he was invited to continue at Drew University, as the Philadelphia Professor of Christian Theology, the beginning of a distinguished career, marked throughout by evangelical scholarship, pastoral dedication, and strongly held views on churchmanship and respect for the common man. During this period his devotion to the Wesleyan tradition was recognized by an invitation in 1954 to deliver the Harris Franklin Rall lectures at what was then Garrett Biblical Institute in Evanston. These were published in 1956 as *Christianity according to the Wesleys*; the book was dedicated to his British Methodist congregations in Romsey Town, Cambridge, and Nicolson Square, Edinburgh. In 1958 he published the *Wesley Hymn Book*, in an effort to help American Methodists recover their traditional hymns, “the treasure entrusted to the Methodist people for the good of the universal Church.” In 1962 he was appointed one of the Methodist observers at the Second Vatican Council, where on December 3, 1962, he arose to point out a discrepancy: “On the one hand, Rome tells us that we are brothers in Christ by virtue of our baptism; on the other hand Rome casts doubt on the validity of our baptism by allowing converts from Protestantism to be rebaptized.” In 1967 he published, *I offered Christ: a Protestant Study of the Mass* (Philadelphia, Fortress Press), whose Protestant focal point seems to have been Charles Wesley.

Another solid indication both of his scholarship and of his passionate concerns is to be seen in the list of his articles for *The Drew Gateway* during his fifteen years at Drew (in addition to thirteen review articles):

- Johann Albrecht Bengel. 24:5-8 (1953)
- The Rediscovery of Wesley. 25:184-186 (1955)
- Wanted: a Methodist Doctrine of the Ministry. 29:59-93 (1959)
- The Wesleys' Churchmanship. 31:147-162 (1961)
- Two More Years of British Methodism. 34:3-29 (1963)

His memorial to Bengel stressed his influence in inspiring John Wesley to prepare his *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*. “The Rediscovery of Wesley” emphasized the theme of The Wesley Society which he had helped to found in 1954, “to explore afresh our historic heritage, our common ground, and our present ecumenical task.” In “Wanted: a Methodist Doctrine of the Ministry,” he discussed the 1958 “Interim Statement” in the Conversations between the British Methodists and the Church of England, argued against the necessity of episcopal succession in a reunited church, remained “unconvinced that reunion without reformation can ever be the will of God for His Church,” and ended by nailing

his own thirty theses to the portals of Drew University. "The Wesleys' Churchmanship" was an address to The Wesley Society. "Two More Years of British Methodism" discussed the final Report of the Conversations on British reunion at great length, claiming that it constituted a desertion of the principles of John Wesley; he ended: "My own belief is that the Presbyterian system of church government is much more satisfactory, and that it would be a backward step for Methodism if she accepted episcopacy in any form." These latter two articles were reprinted in England as *Critique of Two Reports* (London, Epworth Press [1964]).

In 1967, returning to Drew from a sabbatical leave, Dr. Hildebrandt — always a man of strong convictions firmly held — returned to find a troubled situation, which he blamed on the new administration, and resigned his position in protest. Similar tumult met his return to Britain, where he resigned from the Methodist ministry, as what he felt must be the logical outcome of his published views on official Methodism's desertion of their founder. He was in the wilderness. He associated himself with the Presbyterians in Edinburgh, and in his lifelong capacity of pastor served as chaplain at one of their hospitals.

A major scholarly purpose also found fruition during these later years, his commitment to helping the world to know John and Charles Wesley better, through the medium of the Oxford Edition of the Works of John Wesley. He was one of those to whose initiating enthusiasm the Directors have paid tribute in the general introduction to all six volumes so far published. Throughout his days at Drew he remained recording secretary for the Directors' meetings. He was chosen Editor of Vol. 7, *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People called Methodists* (Oxford University Press, 1983), though his close friend, Dr. Oliver Beckerlegge, eventually shared these responsibilities with him. The protracted and arduous labours connected with this large volume brought the present writer into constant lengthy sessions about its many problems and opportunities — at Drew, at Duke, in York, in Edinburgh, with much concentrated attention given to the attempt to record the undoubted scriptural allusions in the hymns. This feature, along with Dr. Hildebrandt's theological commentaries on selected hymns in all Wesley's major sections, and his introductory essay, "A little body of experimental and practical divinity," have been cited as among their major strengths in a volume hailed by The Hymn Society as an "in-every-way-great book of meticulous scholarship not usually given to hymns, but a measure of the editors' regard for *these* hymns."

Dr. Hildebrandt had suffered from indifferent health for several years, though retaining his alertness and the many Christian concerns which constantly motivated him. He suffered a severe stroke in August 1985, and died on Monday, November 25, 1985. He will be greatly missed by his family and friends, but he has bequeathed to us challenging memories of a noble Christian example and a great scholarly heritage, more especially in his writings about John and Charles Wesley.