

The Life of Jacob Albright

by

George Miller

Translated and Edited

by

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

George Miller's brief biographical sketch is our major primary source regarding the life and ministry of Jacob Albright, founder of the Evangelical Association. This source is here presented in its original (1811) German text set side by side with a new English translation.

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Introduction

Jacob Albright is an important link in the extension of the Wesleyan revival among the Germans of North America. Born (May 1, 1759) near Pottstown, Pennsylvania, and raised in the Lutheran tradition, Albright was religiously awakened in connection with the death of several of his children in 1790. At about that time he was exposed to the messages of several preachers of the United Brethren in Christ, most notably Anthony Houtz, who conducted the funeral for the Albright children.

The young farmer and tile-maker Albright went through a long period of penitential struggle as a result of this awakening. In this protracted process his neighbor Adam Riegel, a lay preacher for the United Brethren, was a constant spiritual friend and director. After an extensive period of repentance and spiritual exercise, Albright emerged with his “enlightenment”—an experience of conversion marked by a sense of pardon for sin and the onset of a new life.

Albright’s newly found spiritual existence convinced him of a need for a community of like-minded Christians. Because of their rigorous and resourceful organization, Albright found such a community offered most satisfactorily among the English-speaking Methodists. Thus he joined a Methodist class led by Isaac Davis (Davies) that had been organized near Davis’ home. With these people Albright mastered enough English to acquaint himself with their *Book of Discipline*. Eventually he so progressed as a Methodist that he was called upon to speak in their meetings. It should not be supposed that he actually “preached” in taking a text and delivering a proper sermon, but he exercised a religious rhetorical device called exhortation—an example of which is to be found appended to Miller’s *Life of Jacob Albright* below. For this function Albright was licensed as an exhorter by the Methodist elder. This role as an exhorter often served as a stepping-stone between status as a full member of the Methodist Church and that of a traveling preacher in that communion. Although he learned enough English to gain an understanding of Methodist doctrine and polity, we have no reason to suppose that Albright could exhort, or did exhort, in that language. His speaking appears to have been only in German, for it was only with difficulty that he followed the English exercises of the Methodists.

As an evangelical Christian Albright experienced an ever-increasing concern for his fellow German-Americans whom he regarded as outside the influence—much less the experience—of the Gospel as he now understood it. This burden of concern finally brought him to contemplate his own responsibility, and eventually his vocation. In his personal testimony, Albright related the religious experience in which he was called to preach. Enlightened from within, he received a direct challenge, then a command to preach the Gospel to his fellow Germans.

It is at this point that a second period of spiritual struggle began for Albright. In the great tradition of the calling of divine spokespersons we find Albright protesting his incompetence for the task of preaching. But this humility must be seen in light of the fact that this conviction is as much an evidence of true vocation as it is an argument. Such a commonplace objection can hardly be regarded as decisive in the long run, particularly in view of evidence to the contrary discovered in the process of his function as a successful exhorter.

This brings us round to Albright's second objection to his vocation—the protest that he must go out alone with no credentials and no connection. Here we have to do with a major puzzle in the life of Albright and the movement with which he had to do. As a Methodist exhorter he had already taken a major step in the direction of becoming a traveling preacher in the Methodist connection. Though he had but little formal education and was only an artisan-farmer, this alone would have been no impediment to his being received as a Methodist preacher. Why then this objection on Albright's part? Why did he not follow the well-trod path from local exhortation to local preaching and finally to itinerant preaching? This is an issue on which hangs the rise of the Evangelical Association as a separate ecclesiastical body. The most adequate solution of this riddle is found in the relation of Methodist to ethnicity, as least ethnicity that is other than the predominant one—in this case, English.

Reservations with regard to Albright's vocation to preach to the Germans could be anticipated in two directions, both of which would tend to threaten the Methodist principle of a general itinerancy. First, preaching in German to the German-Americans would tend to raise up German classes and German congregations. Eventually it would probably lead to a German Methodist, in effect a separate denomination. Not unrelated to the first reservation is one more directly related to Albright as a German. Albright was German-speaking and apparently was unable to preach in any other language. As such he would be unable to move from circuit to circuit in the Methodist pattern, but would be limited in his usefulness to such circuits as might be made up of German-speaking societies and preaching places. We have no definite indication of Albright's encounter with these and perhaps other reservations of the Methodists regarding his vocation. We can, however, observe his protracted struggle with that vocation, one that would have been resolved with relative ease had the path to it been open through the Methodist Church.

As things stood, Albright was brought to submit his destiny only through extreme spiritual and physical agony. Through a period of the most severe trials, he was brought at last to submission. Albright's pursuit of his vocation as traveling preacher led him through a period of preparation marked by both scriptural study and harsh ascetic self-discipline. In this process we find no indication of the role that would likely have been played by a senior colleague in the Methodist system. Albright apparently carried through this preparation on his own. When he set out on his first preaching tour he set out alone. He obtained colleagues in the work only as he managed to touch other Germans who were awakened, converted, and eventually drawn into the work by him. Albright's first tour of preaching began in 1796. His early work was met by a combination of interested acceptance, indifference, and bitter rejection; but by 1800 Albright was organizing his first classes. In 1802 his followers had begun to gather in what were called "Big Meetings" which lasted for several days, and by 1803 these had led to the holding of the first conference session. At this conference Albright was ordained to the gospel ministry by his "evangelical friends."¹ There were then only five classes, all in Pennsylvania, east of the Susquehanna. At a second conference in 1806,

¹ Raymond W. Albright, *A History of the Evangelical Church*, (Harrisburg, PA: The Evangelical Press, 1942), p. 66.

our author George Miller was sent to the area west of that river and managed to form ten classes there.²

The first annual conference was held in 1807 where the decision was made to become a “newly-formed Methodist Conference” (commonly known as “the Albright’s People”).³ Albright was elected its first bishop and was further commissioned to draw up its *Book of Discipline*. It appears clear that Albright was uncertain that a new German denomination was to be formed, but this was in fact what had taken place. Yet Albright was not to be its leader, nor the writer of its *Discipline*. His health had begun to fail, and he was afflicted by consumption complicated by the overwork of constant travel and preaching. In the spring of 1808 he was on his way home to die when he became too ill. Thus he spent his last days in a room provided for traveling preachers at the home of George Becker in Kleinfeltersville, Pennsylvania. There he died on May 18, 1808. At the time of his death the Albright’s People numbered about 300, all found in the Pennsylvania Dutch country of eastern Pennsylvania. His work was begun and had received its first stamp by its founder, but it was far from definite what it was to become. Its future was left to a remarkable degree in the hands of our author George Miller, to whom it fell to write the *Book of Discipline* and, as we see here to confirm the foundation of the Albright People by a representation of the life of its founder, Jacob Albright.

George Miller (b. February 16, 1774) was trained in his Lutheran family as both a millwright and a miller and was successful in his business dealings. In 1798 he resolved to stop building mills and to seek God. Having embarked on this spiritual pilgrimage, Miller met Albright and was awakened by his preaching. It was not until 1802 that Miller once more encountered Albright and under his influence experienced a gracious conversion. In 1803 Albright formed a class in Miller’s neighborhood, and George became its leader. Already in 1805 George Miller became an itinerant preacher under Albright and his colleague John Walter. Miller traveled both with Albright and by himself. In the two years that followed, Miller had a busy and fruitful ministry, and in 1807 at the first Annual Conference, he was ordained an elder.

After Albright’s death the work of compiling a *Discipline* fell to Miller. In December of 1808 he began this, his first literary effort, and it was completed and published by the Conference in 1809. His short biography of Albright was received and approved by the Conference of 1810 and published by Johann Ritter of Reading, Pennsylvania, in 1811. In the latter year Miller wrote his little work entitled *Thätiges Christenthum, (Practical Christianity)*, which was approved by the Conference of 1812 and published in 1814 at Reading, Pennsylvania.

Already in 1808 Miller had experienced a failure of his health, which very soon necessitated his withdrawal from the traveling ministry. This disability was a major contributing factor in his fruitful literary career. In 1815 he undertook the writing of his autobiography, which remained unpublished until 1834. In 1812 he had been commissioned to revise the *Discipline*, but this revision was not yet finished at the time of his death. That work was completed by John Dreisbach and Henry Niebel before the General Conference of 1816. George Miller died on April 5, 1816, of tuberculosis, when he was only 42 years of age.

² *Ibid.*, p. 75.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

The *Life of Albright* was reprinted by the denominational publisher of the Evangelical Association at New Berlin, Pennsylvania, in 1834, and bound together with George Miller's autobiography in a little volume entitled *Albrecht und Miller*. The original text was again reproduced in a facsimile edition on the occasion of Albright's 200th birthday (May 1, 1959) by the *Archiv der Westdeutschen Konferenz der Evangelischen Gemeinschaft*. On the same date a translation of most of the work, done by Bishop George Edward Epp, was published by the Historical Society of the Evangelical United Brethren Church in Dayton, Ohio.

In 1808 at the time of Albright's death, his followers were few and generally despised. In Miller's words, "Our enemies greatly rejoiced that they were rid of the man . . . for they disliked him very much."⁴ The 300 or so Albright's People would soon be doomed to oblivion. It was proclaimed of this little group that "they are defeated now; Albright is dead, and they are at an end!"⁵ "However," countered Miller, "They greatly erred, for although Albright was dead, yet God who was the Author of the good work, still lived, and owned the work as His, knowing how to carry it on and how to extend it."⁶

Two years later the Albright's People had by no means disappeared. Still embattled, these people were in danger of losing touch with their founder and forgetting the sense of their name. The oral tradition about Albright, his life and ministry, still lived among his followers, but it was rapidly fading. It remained for the most literary among his immediate disciples to document that tradition. Thus in 1810 we find George Miller undertaking to write a biographical memoir of Jacob Albright—the *Life*.

Miller was determined that the people should not forget their spiritual benefactor and that they should not forget who they were as "Albright's People." The *Life* was addressed in particular to "the fruits of his (Albright's) work," thus to those who were known as Albright's People. More broadly the *Life* was addressed to "every lover of truth." There are however, marks in the style and detail of the work that indicate that it was aimed at the sympathetic reader. The informal exhortation with which the work is concluded indicates that it was intended for "insiders"—for "my Brethren." One also finds details regarding religious states and ecstatic exercises that might easily offend an unsympathetic reader.

The *Life* seems to have had a twofold purpose. The first and most important was to spiritually edify the reader. It was intended to be devotional literature. This is nowhere made so clear as it is by the inclusion of an exhortation at the end. Its second and also its secondary purpose was apologetic. It was intended to encourage the Albright's People and to refute their detractors. It was only "by the way" that Miller took occasion to commend his previous literary production, the *Book of Discipline*.

At the outset Miller renounced any intention to "construct a connected account" of Albright's early life. He rather proposed "the task of briefly imparting to the public the story concerning the heart and the ministerial service" of Jacob Albright. He proposed "to provide a pleasurable service [really "exercise"] to all those who with him were witnesses to the exemplary piety and tirelessness with which [Albright] dedicated

⁴ Reuben Yeakel, *Jacob Albright and His Co-Laborers* (Cleveland, OH: Publishing House of the Evangelical Association, 1883), p. 238.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

himself to service of the Lord.” Miller further sought to “awaken some sort of zealous emulation” of his mentor.

To this edifying function of the *Life* the author added the demonstration that the Albright’s People “need not be ashamed to confess” that they have come to God and Christ “through the instruction of this faithful teacher.” It was further concluded that these people are true Christians, that they did not seek separation from God’s people, and that they had no other object than to build up the church of God.

To inspire and vindicate his people, the author set out to inform the reader about Albright’s spiritual and vocational pilgrimage. He spoke in this sense of Albright’s “gracious awakening,” “the story of the heart of this man.” He called for thanksgiving to “the Giver of all good things who chose this man to be His instrument . . . to revive true Christianity.” To carry out his goal in his narrative, the author, to a remarkable degree, allowed Albright “to tell it himself.”

Miller’s *Life* as it stands is like a piece of jewelry in which Albright’s personal testimony is the featured stone. At the beginning we find the most rudimentary introduction of Albright, followed by a transition to the basic torso of the work which is Albright’s own account of his spiritual pilgrimage. We follow him from “sleeping” sinner through awakened sinner to forgiven and newborn Christian to sanctified believer. The pilgrimage then is followed through the throes of his vocation and ministry to his anticipation of glorious reward.

Having completed his rendition of Albright’s oral tradition of which his six fellow publishers (John Walter, John Dreisbach, John Erb, Matthias Betz, Henry Niebel and Michael Becker) stood as guarantors, Miller penned his conclusion. This part of the *Life* falls into two main divisions. The first is an account of Albright’s physical decline and death, while the second is an evaluation of Albright’s spiritual life, ministry and the fruits of that ministry. Then to the whole of the *Life* was appended an exhortation to the imitation of Albright in honoring God by practice of such virtues as thanksgiving, industry, steadfastness, patience, simplicity and humility. There is a stream of consciousness character to this exhortation, which is preserved in the translation. That this is characteristic of exhortations is made probable by the circumstances of their production and their function in worship. But it is impossible to be certain of this since we have so few clear literary examples of this homiletical genre.

In the translation there has been a conscious effort to retain the literal meaning of the German text as much as is possible. The ideal is that the English reader should be able to read the German text. Though this is by no means possible, a consistent effort has been made to retain or to recreate the author’s style in an English text.