



## **Built on the Rock the Church Doth Stand**

**Text: Nikolaj Frederik Severin Gruntwig (1783-1872)**

**Tune: Ludwig M. Lindeman (1812-1887)**

When we sing hymns about the Christian Church, they are divided into three main categories, each focusing on a different aspect of the Church: the Church Militant (e.g., “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”), the Church Triumphant (e.g., “For All the Saints Who From Their Labors Rest”), and the Church in general. “Built on the Rock the Church Doth Stand” falls into the last category. This last category, of the Church in general, considers on Whom the Church is built, what shape she takes, and the like. For this category, “Built on the Rock” is really the hymn *par excellence*, for it takes into account everything we teach about the Church.

This hymn was given to us by Nikolaj Frederik Severin Gruntwig. Gruntwig has a rather interesting history. He is highly regarded in Danish history, as his work gave rise to a surge of nationalism in the last half of the 19th century. It was marked by a focus on Danish literature coupled with a deep spirituality.

Gruntwig was born September 8, 1783 in Udby, Denmark. He was descended from a long line of ministers, and at age nine was sent to Jylland to study under Laurids Feld, a minister there. In 1800 he went to Copenhagen to study theology at the University. However, during his time there his interest shifted away from theology, being drawn instead to Icelandic Sagas. In fact, by the time of graduation he was completely indifferent to theology. So in 1805 he took the position of tutor for a family on the island of Langeland. The next three years saw him studying writers such as Shakespeare, Schiller, Schelling, and Fichte. In 1808 he returned to Copenhagen and began publishing mythological tales.

In 1810 Gruntwig underwent a theological crisis and converted back to Lutheranism. He returned to his father’s parish in Udby

and became his chaplain. His religious convictions were shown in an 1812 work, *The First World Chronicle*, which was a treatment of European history that showed God’s hand at work in all that occurred.

From 1813 until 1825 he had a stunning output of writings, ranging from histories to poetry. However, in 1825 his writing turned to polemics. He wrote *The Church’s Rejoinder*, a response to a professor of theology at the University of Copenhagen who said that, although the Bible is the foundation of Christianity, it doesn’t fully explain what Christianity is all about. What’s more, the professor claimed Church shouldn’t focus so much on a clear confession of faith because the Church is more of a “community for the purpose of advancing general religiousness.” Gruntwig condemned his ideas a anti-Christian. For this he was prosecuted for libel and fined. He was kept from preaching for seven years. During this time he visited England three times and studied Anglo-Saxon. He spent the remainder of his life highly involved in study and writing both in theology and literature. He died September 2, 1872, the day after preaching his last sermon.

“Built on the Rock the Church Doth Stand” seems to have been born of Gruntwig’s greatest debate against the Copenhagen professor. It begins with a clear statement that the Church is built on the Rock, which is Christ (1 Cor. 10:4). Even when “spires are falling,” that is, congregations come and go, the message of Christ’s rest everlasting continues to ring out. The Church which proclaims this Gospel is not a physical building (st. 2), but the Body of Christ, the assembly of believers who confess Christ to the neighbor, seeking to make them also “heirs of His wondrous salvation.” Stanzas four and five teach us the importance of the physical buildings in which we gather. Their beauty does not increase or diminish Christ’s presence. Rather they are made beautiful by what is said in them, the Word of Christ that embraces us and makes us heirs of His kingdom. The physical places of the Sacraments—the Font and the Altar—and the places where the Word are read remind us that Christ has made His dwelling among us. We pray that the Holy Spirit would draw to these churches everyone who hears the church bells so that through the Means of Grace He would give to them the peace that Christ has left with us to the end of the world (st. 7).