

November 24

Commemoration: Justus Falckner, 1723, pastor in North America

Justus Falckner wrestled with his conscience. The year was 1703 and Lutherans in the new world were in short supply of pastors. One of the few pastors they did have was Andrew Rudman--and his health was failing. Andrew, a Swedish Lutheran working in the New York region had written to Justus, "What shall I do forsaking my little flock? Looking everywhere, I find no one better fitted than you to whom I may safely entrust my sheep."

For 31-year-old Justus, an immediate yes or no wasn't possible. Although well-trained for the task, he had come to America from Germany as a land agent and surveyor, apparently wanting to avoid the ministry. He had his doubts, too, whether he could be legally ordained, for there was no bishop in the colonies to lay hands on him.

Rudman was able to satisfy Justus on the ordination question, assuring him that his bishop in Sweden had authorized him to make ordinations. Furthermore, he could point to precedents. As to his other questions, Falckner found the answer within his own heart.

He wrote to one of his former teachers, August Herman Francke: "After much persuasion, also prompting of heart and conscience, I am staying as a regular preacher with a little Dutch Lutheran congregation, a state of affairs which I had so long avoided."

On this day, November 24, 1703, Andrew Rudman and two other Swedish church leaders ordained Justus in a Philadelphia church. He was the first Lutheran pastor ordained in the region that became the United States.

Justus threw himself into the work. He learned Dutch so that he could preach in it. More than just the pastor of a single church, he sailed up and down the Hudson River visiting his extensive parish. His travels took him through New York, New Jersey, and even into Pennsylvania as a missionary and a pastor, teaching, organizing, and baptizing. His converts included blacks and native Americans. In addition to this missionary work, he prepared a textbook on Christian doctrine and wrote hymns. One that he wrote as a youth, while under the influence of the Pietists (a movement that called Lutherans to deeper spiritual life) looked forward to the Christian's eventual triumph:

When His servants stand before Him
Each receiving his reward,
When His saints in light adore Him,
Giving glory to the Lord;
"Victory!" our song shall be
Like the thunder of the sea.

When another Lutheran pastor, Josua von Kocherthal, died, Justus took over his work, too. The upshot was that Justus wore himself out in a short twenty years of work, dying at the young age of 51.

His records of major ministerial acts--such as baptisms--were often followed by simple written prayers that bared his heart and showed his deep concern for souls. Oddly, for someone so well known, no record was made of the date or place of his death or where he was buried.