CONTRIBUTION OF THE GERMAN REFORMED CHURCH TO AMERICAN CULTURE

by

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It is well known that during the eighteenth century so many immigrants came to Pennsylvania from the Palatinate and from Switzerland that by the time the Declaration of Independence was signed, about one-third of the colony's population was German or Swiss. It is also well known that the heavy German immigration continued throughout the nineteenth century and at times reached the proportions of a national exodus. While political events in Germany contributed to the migration, it was often crop failure, heavy taxation, or simply a dream of America as a land of unlimited opportunities that provided the impetus to start a new life beyond the sea. Thus a substantial number of the German immigrants were humble folk, who upon their arrival engaged in clearing the wilderness and establishing farms, or made their living as craftsmen.

About one third of the Pennsylvania Germans belonged to the Reformed Church. At first, they maintained connections with the Reformed Church of Holland, a wealthy established state church, which could well afford to subsidize missionary work among the German immigrants in the New World. The Reformed Church in the Palatinate, on the other hand, having suffered much persecution, was poor and unable to offer financial assistance to the German congregations scattered on the American frontier. But in 1793, after years of dependence on the mother-church in Holland, the German congregations in Pennsylvania organized themselves into an independent body and became known as *Die Deutsch-Reformierte Kirche der Vereinigten Staaten.*

From the beginning, the church faced many challenges, for the religious situation of early nineteenth-century America was that of great disarray, particularly when viewed through European spectacles. A modern church historian puts the difference into sharp focus when he writes:

> From the European point of view, therefore, the American scene loomed as a reversion to bedlam. Its radical separation of church and state seemed to have exterminated every vestige of any concept of authority. There appeared a riot of sects, and an unholy competition among them. All this was frightening enough... but in addition there were horrendous narratives of American revivals, wherein hysterical enthusiasts barked like dogs, writhed in sawdust.... In the settled opinion of Germany, America was a religious chaos.[1]

It goes without saying that the learned and austere German churchmen who spent their days reading the old church fathers or writing their surveys of systematic theology were appalled by these accounts. So were the laymen, conditioned to give due respect to the men of the cloth and to consider all matters of religion with reverence and awe. This background in itself helped the German Reformed Church preserve a high measure of dignity and independence even at the peak of the revivalistic movement, though at times there were controversies over the matter and the church did not remain wholly unaffected by the religious atmosphere of America. Another factor was the language. The Germans usually came in groups, and settled down in districts where the German element was strong. They clung tenaciously to their mother tongue, which set them apart from the surrounding English-speaking populace and made it more difficult for outside influence to penetrate.

However, there were yet other factors that were instrumental in the church's success in maintaining a distinct character in the avalanche of strange new ways. The objective

of this article is to call attention to some of these factors and to the impact that the German Reformed Church, whose constituency consisted primarily of ordinary, hard-working peasants and artisans, made on the intellectual and religious climate of nineteenth-century America.

Though humble and poor, the German immigrants brought from their homeland a heritage of deep love of religion and deep respect for education. Germany was, after all, the acknowledged leader in educational matters, the home of some of the most venerated centers of learning in the world. It is no wonder that even in America the immigrants insisted from the very beginning on a well-educated clergy and disdained the ill-trained, uncultured preachers so common on the frontier. The earliest church records show that among the sixty-four ministers then in active duty no fewer than thirty-five were educated in German or Swiss universities. As the church grew and the need for additional clergymen became more pressing, the task of adequate theological training began to loom as the most important task of the church. It was the unconditional insistence on well-educated clergy that led to the founding of several colleges and seminaries (Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster, Pa., Heidelberg College in Tiffin, Ohio, Catawba College in Salisbury, N.C., Mission House in Sheboygan, Wis., Mercersburg Seminary in Mercersburg, Pa., and others). Through them, the German Reformed Church contributed to education of young people far beyond its own constituency.

The story of the founding of these institutions sometimes provides interesting reading. Let one example illustrate the trials and tribulations that the founding of an institution of higher learning brought to the church in the first half of the nineteenth century.

In 1834 the Ohio Synod of the German Reformed Church went on record as entertaining "the exalted intention of establishing an institution for the education of worthy young men for the gospel ministry".[2] In 1838, an attempt was made to turn the 'exalted intention' into reality. At the annual

Synod meeting, the Rev. Dr. J. G. Buettner was elected Professor of Theology. His salary was fixed at 250 dollars a year, and besides teaching he was to serve two congregations. The opening of the seminary was advertised in the *Ohio Repository* on September 13, 1838 in the following way:

> Theological Seminary of the
> German Reformed Synod of Ohio, &c.
>
> This institution, for the present located at Canton, Stark County, O., a city which for health and beauty is surpassed by none in the flourishing State of Ohio, will be open for the reception of students from and after the first of October next. The Rev. Dr. J. G. Buettner has been elected professor. He is a man whose theological and philological acquirements recommend him to all who desire a thorough theological education and whom the committee feel proud to recommend to the Christian public for his orthodox doctrine, integrity and moral worth. All lectures will be given in the German and English language if required, and no efforts spared to qualify students to preach in both languages. Those who are desirous of attending are required to make immediate application. Tuition to all theological students free.
>
> Rev. N. P. Hacke, Greensburg
> Rev. C. L. A. Allardt, and
> Rev. G. Schlosser, of Ohio Committee of Arrangements[3]

The same paper also carried an advertisement of Mrs. Buettner's embroidery class.

Dr. Buettner was a very learned man. Born in 1809 in Münchenbernsdorf in Prussia, he matriculated at the University of Leipzig in 1829 and transferred to the University of Jena in 1831. In the spring of 1834 he earned his doctorate there, and in the fall of the same year he sailed for America. He worked as a missionary among the Germans in Pennsylvania, Missouri, and Ohio. He was held in such high esteem by other clergymen in Ohio that he sometimes caused them to suffer feelings of inferiority. In spite of his scholarship,

however, the seminary was a failure. Only two students applied, and both left before the semester was over. There were no students in the second semester. After another unsuccessful semester, Dr. Buettner resigned and returned to Germany, and the seminary closed.

For several years, the question of a seminary was pushed into the background but never quite forgotten. It was raised again at the Synod meetings in 1844, 1846, 1847, and 1848. In 1850, after sixteen years of effort and three failures, a college and a theological seminary were established in Tiffin, Ohio. In a true Reformed tradition they were given the name of Heidelberg.

It is only logical that a church which put so much stress on thorough preparation of clergy would have counted some of the most distinguished theologians of nineteenth-century America among its members. It is beyond the scope of this article to draw a full picture of the accomplishments of the German Reformed Church's theological scholarship. May it suffice to say that for years the seminary in Mercersburg stood under profound influence of two widely acclaimed scholars, Dr. J. W. Nevin and Dr. Philip Schaff. Nevin, an American of Scotch background, came from a Presbyterian family but during the early years in the ministry became deeply attracted to both the German language and the German theology, joined the German Reformed Church and eventually became one of its best-known spokesmen. Dr. Schaff was called to the Mercersburg professorship from Berlin, where he had earned his doctorate at the age of twenty-two and began to lecture as *Privatdocent* at the age of twenty-four. "He and Nevin propounded what was known as the 'Mercersburg Theology,' chiefly through the medium of a journal, *The Mercersburg Review,* which was as sophisticated a work as America could then boast."[4] His influence was enormous both inside and outside the German Reformed Church; his fame was worldwide. He occupies a position of honor in the history of American theological scholarship.

The insistence on thorough education of the clergy was only one distinct mark of the German Reformed Church; a second mark was the emphasis on an educated laity. The fatherland of the German immigrants was not only the land of famous universities; it was also a land where public education was offered to both rich and poor, where thousands of new books appeared annually, where orthodox religious training was the concern of not only the church but also the family. The church in America continued in the same tradition. It engaged in a rather prolific publication enterprise and exercised influence over its membership through magazines and books. In the course of time, several magazines (*Evangelische Kirchenzeitung, Die Evangelische Zeitung, Der Herold, Die Kirchliche Zeitschrift, Der Evangelist,* and others) appeared, only to disappear after a few months or years. Finally, two papers came on the scene that were destined to outlast the others. In 1835, Rev. B. S. Schneck of Gettysburg, Pa. started to publish *Der Christliche Herold,* and in 1837 Rev. J. C. Guldin of Chester County, Pa. came along with *Die Evangelische Zeitschrift.* In the same year, both these privately-owned publications were transferred to the Board of Missions of the church, merged into one and renamed *Die Christliche Zeitschrift.* The printing, originally left in Gettysburg, was later transferred to Chambersburg, Pa., where the church founded its first printing establishment. In 1848 the title was changed again, this time to *Die Reformierte Kirchenzeitung;* under this name the paper kept appearing for more than half a century.

On July 30, 1864, the publishing work of the church came to a sudden stop in a shattering way. The Civil War was raging, and a detachment of the southern army invaded Chambersburg and burned the town almost to the ground. The beautiful printing house with all its valuable contents was totally destroyed, and the church was left without the necessary facilities to publish its books and magazines. After the calamity, the printing operation was transferred to Philadelphia.

It is obviously impossible to list all the books published by the German Reformed Church. A short mention, though, should be made of the publication of the hymnal *Sammlung Evangelischer Lieder,* commissioned by the Synod in 1841, which replaced the widely used hymnbook *Neues und Verbessertes Gesangbuch* of 1797. The new hymnal was unfortunately hastily prepared and was replaced in 1859 by the *Deutsches Gesangbuch.*

Of far greater importance than the publication of the hymnals was the repeated publication of a book venerated by Reformed churches the world over, the *Heidelberg Catechism.* First published in 1563 in Heidelberg on orders of Frederick the Pious, Elector of the Palatinate, the book is considered to be one of the finest products of the German Reformation. In the succeeding centuries, it was used by Reformed churches far beyond the narrow boundaries of its place of origin, and its fate in the United States presents an interesting story in itself. According to church historian J. H. Dubbs, the Dutch deserve the credit for having brought it first to our shores:

> There is every reason to believe that religious services were held on the site of the present city of New York soon after the first settlement of New Amsterdam, in 1614. It has, therefore, been plausibly asserted that "Heidelberg Catechism was taught in America before the Pilgrims landed on Plymouth Rock".[5]

About one hundred years later a group of Germans from the Palatinate brought a German edition of the book to their new home in Pennsylvania. It was bound into one volume along with a hymnbook, the Psalms, and a collection of family prayers. The first American edition appeared in 1752 in Germantown, Pa., a work of the famous printer Christoph Saur who is said to have printed more books than any other printer in the colonies. It, too, was bound together with

the hymnal, the Psalms, the list of gospel and epistle readings for the church year, and a short treatise entitled *Historie der Zerstörung Jerusalems.* The book, used by the members of the earliest German Reformed congregations in America, was apparently published only once.

The next edition of the catechism, dating from 1790, appeared at Carl Cist's publishing house in Philadelphia. The Psalms and hymns were gone, but in their stead there was an appendix of two parts: *Erste Wahrheits-Milch für Säuglinge am Alter und Verstand,* and *Ein kurzer Auszug aus dem Herrn Doktor und Professor Lampe's heil. Brautschmuck usw.* The same book was later republished by Cist's successor, Conrad Zentler. In the first half of the nineteenth century the catechism was published three more times: by G. W. Mentz in Philadelphia, by Gruber und May in Hagerstown, Pa., and by the Reformed Church's publishing house in Chambersburg. The first English translation published in America appeared in 1820 in Philadelphia.

However, 'the year of the Heidelberg Catechism' was 1863, the 300th anniversary of its appearance. That year, which brought enormous suffering to the country as a whole, was in many ways the most glorious year in the history of the German Reformed Church. While a suggestion for an impressive commemoration was expressed already in 1857, it was renewed two years later at a meeting of the Pennsylvania clergy who formally sent to the Synod the following resolution:

> Beschlossen, Dass es der Synode empfohlen sei, die Bearbeitung und Herausgebung einer kritischen Musterausgabe des Heidelberger Katechismus, enthaltend den ursprünglichen deutschen und lateinischen Text von 1563, eine revidierte englische Uebersetzung, sammt einer geschichtlichen Einleitung, zu veranstalten; welches Werk im Jahre 1863 als Jubel-Ausgabe in würdiger und eleganter Ausstattung veröffentlicht, und nachgehends allen gewöhnlichen Ausgaben zu Grund gelegt werden soll.[6]

The Synod acted favorably on the resolution, charging the church at large to plan the celebration as 'a sublime festal service to God', and soon plans got under way for a truly impressive observance of the anniversary. To coincide with the precise date of the original publication—January 19, 1563—the Synod was held that year from January 17 to January 23, and no less than twenty-one papers on the catechism or on Reformed theology were read by American Reformed clergy or by German and Dutch theologians invited specifically for the occasion. The Historical Society of the Reformed Church was organized; special services were held in numerous congregations; large free-will offerings for the work of the church were received throughout the year. In general, the church experienced a time of remarkable joy, vigor, and growth.

From the literary aspect two works of lasting value were published. The first was the impressive *Gedenkbuch der dreihundertjährigen Jubelfeier des Heidelberger Katechismus in der Deutsch-Reformierten Kirche der Vereinigten Staaten,* containing a valuable historical introduction and texts of the papers read at the Synod. Because of the Chambersburg fire, it was published with great difficulty but did appear in the anniversary year. The second book was the so-called Tercentenary edition of the catechism, and included a 127-page long introduction with the standard text in old German, Latin, modern German, and English. It appeared at Scribner's of New York, and was considered the finest edition ever published.

The festive mood characterized not only the official activity of the church's ecclesiastical leadership but was felt among the grass-roots membership as well. One devout member, Henry Leonard, the first financial agent of Heidelberg College, left behind a long poem which expresses well the mood of the time. It reads in part:

Hört! hört! wie tönt das Jubellied
So schön und herrlich über Land;

Gott Lob! das bringt doch wahre Freud,
Herr, öffne uns in Dankbarkeit
Und Liebe Herz und Mund und Hand.

Eilt, Christen, eilt zum Tempel hin:
Reich, Arm, Alt, Jung und Gross und Klein
Komm Nord, Süd, Komm Ost und West,
Dreihundertjährig Jubelfest
Will von uns hoch gefeiert sein!

Nach dreimal hundert Jahren steht
Mein alter Glaube fest und gut;
Mein Trost in aller Seelennoth,
Mein Trost im Leben und im Tod:
Das gibt das Herz zum Danken Muth.[7]

Henry Leonard, incidently, a man widely known in the church under the nickname 'The Fisherman' because of his "fishing for funds" the newly founded college desperately needed, brought about the endowment of the German Professorship at Heidelberg College in 1862. From the testimonies of his contemporaries it appears that he was the most colorful personality in the history of the institution; from his life's work it is obvious that he was the finest example of a member of the German Reformed Church: of humble origin, yet totally devoted to the cause of religion and the cause of education.

The simple marker over his grave bears the words, 'This mortal put on immortality'. The same, perhaps, could be said about the church he so dearly loved. Like him, it is no more; German has long since ceased to be used within its congregations, and through various mergers with other denominations the German Reformed Church has eventually become a part of the United Church of Christ. But his labor of love for the church and the college entitled him—at least in the opinion of his contemporaries—to immortality; likewise, the labor of love of the German Reformed Church entitles it to at least a measure of grateful remembrance.

NOTES

1. Perry Miller in "Editor's Introduction" to Philip Schaff, **America** (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1961), p. viii.

2. J. H. Dubbs, **Historical Manual of the Reformed Church in the United States** (Lancaster, 1888), p. 303.

3. Quoted in James Good, **History of the Reformed Church in the U. S. in the Nineteenth Century** (The Board of Publications of the Reformed Church in America, New York, 1911), p. 118.

4. Perry Miller, **ibid.**, pp. xxiii-xxiv.

5. J. H. Dubbs, **ibid.**, p. 157.

6. **Gedenkbuch der dreihundertjährigen Jubelfeier des Heidelberger Katechismus in der Deutsch-Reformierten Kirche der Vereinigten Staaten** (M. Kieffer u. Comp., Chambersburg, 1863), p. viii.

7. Henry Leonard, **The Fisherman's Allegories** (Reformed Publishing Co., Dayton, 1887), pp. 297-298.

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