

## German Reformed Church

While the independent Congregationalists had been struggling in New England to recover and maintain biblical faithfulness, a stream of German and German and Swiss settlers—farmers, laborers, trade and craftpeople, many "redemptioners" who had sold their future time and services to pay for passage—flowed into Pennsylvania and the Middle Atlantic region. Refugees from the waste of European wars, their concerns were pragmatic. They did not bring pastors with them. People of Reformed biblical faith, at first sustained only by family worship at home, they were informed by the Bible and the Heidelberg Catechism.

Strong relationships developed between Lutheran and Reformed congregations; many union churches shared buildings. At first, there were no buildings and laymen often led worship. In 1710, a Dutch Reformed minister, Paul Van Vlecq, assisted a German congregation gathered at Skippack, Pennsylvania. At nearby White Marsh, Van Vlecq established a congregation in the house of elder William Dewees, who held the congregation together until the church was reestablished in 1725.

Another layman, tailor Conrad Templeman, conducted services in Lancaster county, ministering to seven congregations during the 1720s. Schoolmaster John Philip Boehm had maintained a ministry for five years without compensation. Responsible for the regular organization of 12 German Reformed congregations in Pennsylvania, although not regularly ordained, he reluctantly was persuaded to celebrate the sacraments for the first time on October 15, 1725, at Falkner Swamp, with 40 members present. Boehm, orderly, well educated, devout, spent the ensuing years traveling the country on horseback, 25,000 miles in all, preparing Reformed Church constitutions.

Meanwhile, the Heidelberg-educated and regularly ordained pastor George Michael Weiss arrived from Germany in 1727 to minister to the Philadelphia church founded by Boehm. He carried the Word and the Lord's Supper to communities surrounding Philadelphia. Weiss' strong objections to Boehm's irregular ministry caused Boehm to seek and receive ordination by the Dutch Reformed Church by 1729. Funds for American churches were still coming from Europe, and Weiss went abroad to Holland in pursuit of support for his congregations. Successful, he returned in 1731 to minister among German Reformed people in New York. Before 1746, when Michael Schlatter, a Swiss-born and Dutch-educated young pastor from Heidelberg, arrived in America, congregations of German settlers were scattered throughout Pennsylvania and New York.

### Followed rivers and mountain valleys

German immigrants had followed natural routes along rivers and mountain valleys, and Reformed congregations had emerged in Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina. The spiritual and financial health of these 40 congregations were watched over by the Dutch Reformed Church in Holland, assisted by the German Reformed center at Heidelberg, Germany.

Support came from the Classis (the local church governing body) of Amsterdam that sent Michael Schlatter to America to "organize the ministers and congregations into a Coetus (a synod, pronounced SEE-tis). Schlatter did this within a year of his arrival in Pennsylvania. With the cooperation of Boehm, Weiss, John Bartholomew Rieger, and 28 elders, the Coetus of the Reformed Ministerium of the Congregations in Pennsylvania came to life on September 24, 1747 and adopted in 1748 the Kirchen-Ordnung ("church order") that Boehm had prepared in 1725. The Kirchen-Ordnung placed discipline and care of the local church in the hands of a consistory of elders, deacons and the minister elected by the congregation. Members were charged with "fraternal correction and mutual edification." The minister was to preach "the pure doctrine of the Reformed Church according to the Word of God and to administer the holy seals of the Covenant ... always to adhere to the Heidelberg Catechism ... to hold catechetical instruction ... [and] give special attention to church discipline, together with those who have oversight of the congregation."

In light of the multiplicity of German sects—such as Moravians, Mennonites and Dunkards—who competed for the attention and allegiance of German immigrants, the authority of the Coetus, organized according to the same structure and discipline as the local church, was welcome. The German Reformed Churches felt protected from "unscrupulous proselytizers." They achieved a mutual identity and respect, and established authority for faith and practice. Among pastor and people, shared responsibility was carried out within a community of faith, under the Lordship of Christ.

The leadership of Michael Schlatter and his colleagues prepared the congregations to endure the upheaval of the American Revolution and to maintain their identity in the ethnic and religious pluralism that characterized William Penn's colony.

## Fought in Revolution

Many German Reformed settlers served in the Revolutionary armies, 20 percent of Reformed pastors as chaplains, although Continental Congress Chaplain John Joachim Zubly was labeled a Tory for his anti-war stand. During the British siege of Philadelphia in 1777, farmers wrapped the Liberty Bell and the bells of Christ Church in potato sacks and hauled them to Allentown, Pennsylvania, where pastor Abraham Blumer hid them under the floor of Zion Reformed Church for safekeeping. Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben, a German military officer and Reformed layman, trained George Washington's troops during the bitter Valley Forge winter.

The Coetus strengthened the churches and prepared them for self-government in the early years of the United States. By 1793, European ties were broken. A Reformed Church Constitution was adopted, a Synodal Ordnung; an official name was taken, The Synod of the German Reformed Church in the United States of America, and a hymnbook committee appointed. There were in that year 178 German-speaking congregations and 15,000 communicant members.

The Reformed response to the Great Awakenings was mixed. On the one hand, revival theology was antithetical to the German Reformed tradition. On the other, the influence of European Pietism responded to revivalism's emphasis on personal conversion and moral living. On the frontier, independent settlers found the revival's spirit of individualism compatible with their needs. The newly independent German Reformed Church, short of pastors and threatened by a revivalist gospel, established a seminary in 1825, at Carlisle, Pennsylvania, that moved in 1829 to York, in 1837 to Mercersburg and finally to Lancaster in 1871, where it became Lancaster Theological Seminary. Franklin College (1787) of Lancaster, jointly supported by the Lutherans and the Reformed, in 1853 merged with German Reformed Marshall College to form Franklin and Marshall College.

As ministers arrived in America from the pietist centers in Europe, pietistic rather than confessional patterns appeared in Reformed congregations, and the influence of the Heidelberg Catechism was dimmed. Missionary zeal abounded. People were highly susceptible to the leadership of charismatic frontier preachers. Church leaders were concerned that young and old be instructed in Reformed Christian doctrine. In 1806, the first German Reformed Sunday schools appeared.

In the midst of it all, and in reaction to revivalist sectarianism, a controversial movement at the seminary at Mercersburg set off a re-examination of the doctrines of Christ and of the church not just in the German Reformed Church but among all American Protestants.

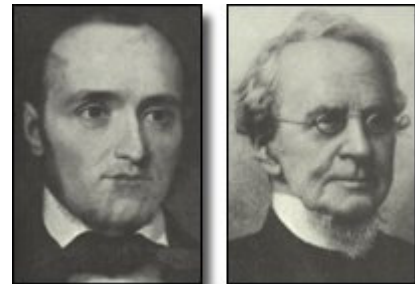
First, however, there would be years of unrest when the Synod would endure turmoil and defection that would test and eventually strengthen its essential stability. Pietist minister Philip William Otterbein, a Reformed Church pastor, later founded the United Brethren Church, today a part of the United Methodist Church. Harrisburg's pastor, John Winebrenner, locked out of his church by the local consistory, met with his followers in private homes to form a new denomination—the Churches of God.

As the Reformed Church grew, continuing use of the German language became an issue. Although German congregations were divided between the use of German or English, the Synod itself conducted meetings and issued minutes in German until 1825. By 1824, the Ohio Synod separated from the parent synod in order to ordain its own ministers and in 1850 organized Heidelberg College and Seminary in Tiffin.

## Mercersburg movement shakes church

The controversial Mercersburg movement would shake the church. With the arrival at the Mercersburg Seminary of John W. Nevin and Swiss-German professor of historical and exegetical theology, Philip Schaff, Mercersburg became a center of opposition to the revivalism of the American "Great Awakening." Schaff was the most outstanding church historian in the North America in the 19th-century and for years was the primary mediator of German theology across the Atlantic.

The Mercersburg movement, counter to the sectarian trend of the time, called for a "true revival" centered in the life of the church,



Mercersburg Movement founders  
Philip Schaff and John Nevin.

guided by the catechetical system and, in particular, the Heidelberg Catechism. The movement's leaders called for a recognition of the church as one, catholic, and holy. They acknowledged the error to which the church in all ages had been subject, urged an end to sectarianism and pretensions to be the one true church and criticized prejudice against Roman Catholics.

Schaff's charitable attitude was feared as a heresy by some members of the Reformed Church—who called themselves the "Old Reformed" and were loyal to Zwingli's Reformation.

Nevin, Schaff and their followers sought to return to the ancient ecumenical creeds and argued that the mystical presence of Christ, mediated by word and sacrament, was the essence of the church. Reverence for creeds, catechism and liturgy, they believed, would unify the church and ward off the danger of sectarianism which already had split Protestantism in the United States into hundreds of competing denominations. In liturgy, the Mercersburg reformers restored the altar as the center of worship along with litanies, chants, prayers and vestments, while the Old Reformed pastors preferred a central pulpit towering over a small holy table, extemporaneous prayer and informal worship.

The Old Reformed were caught up in the American revival and clung to their German sectarian identities. Schaff maintained that Reformed theology's contribution to the New World lay in the supremacy of the scriptures, absolute sovereignty of divine grace and radical moral reform on the basis of both. A former member of the Evangelical Church of the Prussian Union, Schaff later cultivated warm relationships with Evangelicals in the West.

The Mercersburg Review, which began publication at Marshall College in 1848, became the movement's most important medium and began to influence Reformed pastors, teachers and laypeople. Its challenge would call other Protestant denominations to self-examination as well. The Mercersburg Movement anticipated by nearly 100 years the 20th-century ecumenical movement based upon the rediscovery of historic liturgy, a renewed emphasis on the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion, and a common affirmation of the ancient creeds.

In 1867 the low-church Old Reformed minority in the East called a convention in Myerstown, Pennsylvania, to organize against a proposed Reformed liturgy influenced by Schaff and Nevin. In January, 1868, the Old Reformers began to publish the Reformed Church Quarterly and in 1870 Ursinus College opened its doors as a center for education devoted to the Old Reformed cause.

Source: <http://www.ucc.org/aboutus/shortcourse/reformed.htm>  
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