

## THE CHURCH PEOPLE IN COLONIAL PENNSYLVANIA

BY H. M. J. KLEIN

Franklin and Marshall College, Lancaster, Pennsylvania

**T**HERE is doubtless a clear line of demarcation to be found somewhere between so-called church people and the sects. But, frankly, the writer has not been able to find that line. Everything seems to depend on the viewpoint of the observer. It is somewhat like the difference between heterodoxy and orthodoxy. Churches broke up into sects, and sects in the course of time established churches. There is a sense in which all denominations began as sects. In the second and third generations the sects began to lose their character and were transformed into churches.

As a working hypothesis, however, it is well to assume that church people were the groups who conformed, with more or less rigidity, to an established ecclesiastical order or to a civil order as found in a state church. They believed, too, in the historical development of the Christian life.

In his *Social Sources of Denominationalism* Dr. Niebuhr contends that a sect is a voluntary association, while a church is a natural social group akin to the family or nation. Thus one joins a sect but is born into a church. This distinction does not help us very much. "Churches emphasize the universal elements," says Dr. Niebuhr; "sects appeal to the individualistic element in Christianity and emphasize its ethical demands." The statement is true, especially in regard to the emphasis of the sects on extreme individualism.

As a consequence of the idea of conformity to established order the church people emphasized the means of grace, sacraments, official clergy, and systems of training the young in the doctrines of the church. The sects insisted on definite religious experiences and ignored the distinction between ordained and lay clergy. The conventional churches were concerned with the teaching process through catechisms which embodied the dogmas of the church. The sects stressed not a system of dogma, but

each emphasized some one or other tenet or custom, and they became more hairsplitting in their distinctions as they divided and subdivided into various groups.

The church people stood for authority in church life and conformity to established order. The sects stood, at least in theory, for freedom from outward authority. When the Amish Mennonites came to Pennsylvania, they presented to William Penn a memorial, dated May 20, 1718, in which these sentiments are expressed :

We are governed by the laws of God, you by the laws of man. Those of human authority cannot control us in opposition to His will. We will not be insulted by the tyranny of authority. We came to Pennsylvania to enjoy freedom of mind and body, expecting no other imposition than that declared by God. We will respect your rights and we want you to respect our customs.

The spirit of the church people, who had come from communities where the church was a part of the recognized order, was different from this lofty individualism. While members of the earliest sects had made their way to Pennsylvania primarily because of persecutions suffered at the hands of both church and state, the later immigrations which brought the bulk of the church people were due primarily not to persecution, but to the successful advertisement of the resources and possibilities of the province of Pennsylvania. With the literature of this high-pressure salesmanship of the early eighteenth century we are all familiar.

The immigrants known as the church people were from the Palatinate and Württemberg, Holland, England, Scotland, and Switzerland. They came as scattered groups in successive waves of migration. Only occasionally did they bring their ministers and schoolmasters with them, but they always brought their prayer books, their catechisms, and the memory of their church life in Europe.

It is true that the Lutherans, the Anglicans, the Catholics, and the Calvinists of Holland, Switzerland, France, Scotland, and the Palatinate early established individual congregations and parishes in provincial Pennsylvania. To go into this aspect of church life, however fascinating the discussion might be, would

carry us too far afield. Suffice it to say that the American organization of these churches was chaotic because of the difficulties of communication with the home centers in Europe.

The sects allowed anyone to preach and to organize a group, but the church people held to the tradition of an ordained ministry. This variance frequently created difficulty. For instance, in 1720 a young schoolmaster by the name of John Philip Boehm, son of a Reformed minister in Hochstadt, Germany, landed in Pennsylvania, where he found a goodly number of Reformed people scattered all through the southeastern part of the province. For several years he served them as reader and conducted services for them. After a while they urged Boehm to seek ordination and become a minister, but he declined. In one of his reports he wrote:

They resolved once more urgently to request me, although for full five years I had declined to do so, that I would become their pastor. This was so touchingly represented to me by two of their number that our hearts melted together, in tears, and in the name of all the Christian people it was pressed upon my conscience whether I had the courage to answer for it at the last judgment if I should leave them thus without help and allow so many souls to remain scattered among all kinds of sects of which the country is filled. I thought indeed that it would be better for me if I could escape this yoke and support my family with work and agriculture, but I was convinced by my conscience that I could not do otherwise. I allowed myself, therefore, to be persuaded to this work.

As a layman, not as an ordained minister, Boehm commenced to preach regularly, and in 1725 he administered the communion in Falckner Swamp, Skippach, and Whitemarsh. He organized these congregations and prepared for them a constitution, which was later revised and approved by the classis of Amsterdam in 1728 and became the pattern for Reformed congregations in this country in the eighteenth century. He spread his labors throughout the whole region of southeastern Pennsylvania, in which are now included the counties of Philadelphia, Bucks, Montgomery, Northampton, Lehigh, and Berks.

Meanwhile in the region known as Canastota, lying west of the Octorara in what was Chester county up to the time of the

formation of Lancaster county in 1729, another layman, known as the pious tailor, John Conrad Templeman, became a reader to the scattered adherents of the Reformed faith. He wrote later: "The church in Canastota had its origin in the year 1725, with a small gathering in private houses, here and there, with the reading of a sermon, with singing and prayer, on all Sundays and holidays, but for want of ministers, without the administration of Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper." The people of the Conestoga region were very anxious to have Templeman as their pastor, but he declined. They then invited John Philip Boehm to organize them into regular congregations, and for four years, from 1725 to 1729, Boehm preached and organized churches.

In the meantime there came to Philadelphia, in September, 1727, on the ship "William and Sarah" an ordained minister of the Reformed faith by the name of George Michael Weiss. A representative of the church order, he was the leader of a colony of four hundred Palatines, who shortly after their arrival signed the oath of allegiance to George II of England. He proceeded to organize congregations in Philadelphia, Germantown, and other points. When he found that Boehm, a layman, was preaching, he declared his methods not in accordance with church law. He visited the communities in which the young schoolmaster preached and tried to persuade the people to renounce the ministry of one who was "not fit to administer the sacraments." In a letter written to a friend on October 2, 1727, Weiss declared that he could not recognize Boehm as a Reformed teacher and preacher until he had submitted to an examination and had been regularly ordained. To add to the provocation Weiss ordered Boehm to appear before the Presbyterian minister at Philadelphia, the Reverend Jedidiah Andrews, for examination as to his fitness to conduct religious services.

The conflict of these two men was evidenced in another rupture at Skippach, where Weiss organized a separate congregation, although Boehm continued to preach to his own group. Boehm's friends attacked the validity of Weiss' ordination. In a letter to Heidelberg in which he requested a copy of his certificate of ordination Weiss complained to the church council of the Palatinate concerning the condition of religious and ecclesiastical affairs in Pennsylvania. The upper consistory of the Palatinate thereupon communicated with the synod of South Holland asking

aid for fellow religionists in Pennsylvania. Thus the sorry condition of the Reformed people of Pennsylvania was brought to the attention of the organized Reformed church of Holland.

The reply of the synod of South Holland was favorable to the petition of the consistory of Heidelberg. The great consistory of Heidelberg applied for the aid of the synod of South Holland in building a church in Pennsylvania "for our fellow believers, who have removed thither, inasmuch as they are compelled to hold their divine services under the blue sky." From this time, July 6, 1728, until 1792 the Reformed churches of Pennsylvania were closely linked to the Reformed church of Holland.

The difficulty between Boehm and Weiss was finally settled to the satisfaction of all concerned. Boehm was persuaded by his friends to be ordained. His leading elder, William DeWees, accompanied him to New York to confer with several ministers of the Dutch Reformed church, who advised writing to the classis of Amsterdam a request for the legalization of the ordination of John Philip Boehm by the ministers of New York.

The petition, signed by the consistories of the Reformed churches of Falckner Swamp, Skippach, and Whitemarsh, revealed the church people's deep concern over their chaotic religious situation.

We, the undersigned, [began the preamble] situated in the Province of Pennsylvania, in America, under the crown of Great Britain, find ourselves in the name of our congregations under absolute compulsion and obligation to have recourse to your reverend body, and to lay before you the need and perplexity of your congregations, and entreat you to honor us with your Christian help by means of an ecclesiastical resolution, which will tend to our rest and to the up-building of Reformed worship in this far-off region of the world.

The classis of Amsterdam directed that Boehm be ordained by one of the ministers in New York. "We could not receive your reply without tears," wrote Boehm shortly thereafter to the classis, "because of our surprise and heart-thrilling joy, considering that the Reverend Classis had so graciously listened to the prayers of us poor people."

The ordination of John Philip Boehm was performed in 1730 by Domine Henricus Boel and Domine DuBois in the Dutch

Reformed church of New York. The Reverend George Michael Weiss was present at the ordination, and reconciliation speedily followed. John Conrad Templeman, who after leaving Lancaster went to Lebanon, was at the age of fifty-nine likewise ordained to the ministry, after having preached for more than a quarter of a century as a layman.

But in spite of earnest efforts to bring order out of chaos by insistence on church law and order, confusion continued to prevail in the church life of the province of Pennsylvania. Aggressive leaders of sects associated with the Anabaptist movement in Europe confounded the church people and added to their perplexities. In 1730 John Peter Miller came to America and, under the influence of Conrad Beissel, soon openly deserted the church group. Ten years later appeared George Whitefield, who was like a two-edged sword, dividing every church community into which he entered.

The efforts of Weiss and Boehm to suppress irresponsible pietists and to check the dissension created by the preaching of vagrants were futile. It was clear that if the church was to be planted firmly in the New World, organization was needed for protection against impostors, fanatics, and schismatics. Ministers, schoolmasters, church buildings, hymn books, and catechisms were essential.

Under these sorry circumstances, as by the providence of God, two leaders appeared upon the scene—Michael Schlatter and Henry Melchior Mühlberg. Schlatter was commissioned by the deputies of the Reformed synods of South and North Holland to visit and organize the Reformed people into congregations and to persuade the ministers already in active service in the colony of Pennsylvania to bring into existence an annual synod, to be composed of pastors and elders from the various charges. Schlatter himself was to be a sort of general superintendent, visiting all the congregations and annually reporting their condition to the synods of Holland. He was to see to it that the congregations adhered to the faith and customs of the church.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The synods in Holland had not been hasty in deciding to send a representative to Pennsylvania. For twenty years the claims of the early American colonists in Pennsylvania had been urged upon them. A communication in 1730 from Pennsylvania soliciting aid in planting churches in America resulted in an investigation and a pamphlet on the subject published by the

After his arrival in Philadelphia on September 6, 1746, he proved to be a veritable eighteenth-century whirlwind. From 1747 to 1751 he traveled over eight thousand miles on horseback and made several trips back to Holland and Switzerland. He brought forty-six Reformed settlements into congregational and synodical organization. When a congregation was having difficulty, he would call it together, make inquiries, and take a vote on the question by having members raise their right hands to show approval according to an old Swiss custom in the state assemblies. "At the close of my travels for this year," he wrote in concluding his 1746 journal, "I must say that I have met in various places, many truly upright and pious people who awakened my inner sympathy. The vineyard of the Lord in these widely extended regions has been deplorably desolated by means of all kinds of sects, so that those who confess the pure doctrine have been exceedingly discouraged."

In August, 1747, Schlatter called together all the ministers and elders of the Reformed congregations for the organization of the first ecclesiastical synod or assembly. He noted in his journal: "On the 29th, being the time appointed, the first ecclesiastical Synod was commenced to be held in my house in Philadelphia. In the morning at nine o'clock the assembly consisting of thirty-one members proceeded to the church." At an extraordinary session held in Philadelphia two years later it was resolved that inasmuch as many of the letters and writings which had been dispatched to Holland had been lost, the leader was to be sent to Europe to lay before the synods the condition of the church in Pennsylvania. In his consequent account to the Holland deputies Schlatter described in detail the topography, climate, inhabitants, and towns of Pennsylvania. He noted that Philadelphia consisted of twenty-three hundred houses, mostly of stone; Newcastle, two hundred and forty; Chester, one hundred and twenty; Germantown, two hundred and fifty; Lancaster, five hundred; York, one hundred and ninety; and Reading, sixty. The whole province, according to his estimate, contained one

deputies of the synod of South Holland. A year later the whole Dutch synod in session at Dortrecht visited a group of eight hundred exiled Palatines who were on their way to Rotterdam and promised them assistance in their new venture in America. For the next fifteen years there was considerable correspondence between Holland and the Reformed immigrants in Pennsylvania.

hundred and ninety thousand souls, of which thirty thousand were of the Reformed faith, scattered through all the counties. He reported that the forty-six congregations over which he presided were as a rule not even provided with good schoolmasters. "In most places the schoolmasters cannot possibly live on the income of their schools and hence forsake the work to earn their bread by the labor of their hands."

As a result of Schlatter's plea the reverend synod of north Holland decided to place Pennsylvania on its list of needy churches and to urge five or six able ministers to be brought before them for examination and ordination, thereafter to be sent to Pennsylvania in the service of the churches. For this missionary enterprise Schlatter was authorized to collect funds from towns, churches, and individuals. The money was to be placed on interest in Holland under the supervision of the reverend deputies and the interest sent annually to Pennsylvania. The churches of the Netherlands, the Palatinate, and Switzerland were deeply stirred by Schlatter's eloquent and sincere appeal. According to the "Hallische Nachrichten" by Henry Melchior Mühlenberg almost sixty thousand dollars was raised in Europe. Even more important, however, was the fact that Schlatter secured six young recruits, most of them from the University of Herborn, to return with him to America. These young men, including Otterbein, Waldschmidt, and Stoy, were examined by the classis of Amsterdam, ordained to the ministry, and commissioned at the Hague for mission work in "the forsaken vineyard of Pennsylvania."

After his return from Holland Schlatter was appointed superintendent and agent for the London society for the establishment and support of schools in Pennsylvania. This activity gradually led into what was known as the charity-school movement, with which he was identified for several years. As a result of his call for schoolmasters and schools almost \$100,000 was raised in Great Britain; among the trustees of this fund were Benjamin Franklin and Conrad Weiser. The schools were to be conducted strictly on religious principles, and twelve Calvinistic ministers were employed as catechists to instill into youthful minds the doctrines of the church. Eventually the charity-school movement collapsed, largely through the opposition of Christopher Saur.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The synod which Schlatter organized in 1747 was subject to the authority and supervision of the synods of Holland until 1792.



The early Lutheran settlements in Pennsylvania prior to the days of Penn cannot be discussed here. It may be noted, however, that in the services held by the Swedes on the Delaware the Lutheran clergymen officiated, clad in robe and surplice, and rendered the Lutheran ritual in its fullness according to the custom of the mother country. In 1694 the first German Lutheran service in the province of Pennsylvania was held by a band of forty immigrants, six of whom were theological students. When Daniel Falckner, who succeeded Pastorius as head of the Frankfort Land Company, went to Europe in 1698, he set forth the lamentable state of the political as well as the religious condition of the province. His brother, Justus Falckner, who had been a student at Halle, was the first Lutheran minister ordained in America. For a long time, however, Lutherans in Pennsylvania were without adequate churches; many immigrants but few pastors came to the land of Penn. "There is here a large number of Germans who have partly crawled in among the different sects who use the English tongue," wrote Justus Falckner. After 1727 these immigrants, Lutheran and Reformed, arrived by the thousands. The decade between 1730 and 1740 must have been filled with religious excitement and disturbances without end. The Lutherans of Philadelphia wrote to their brethren abroad in 1734: "We live in a land full of heresy and sects. The great number of young people growing up are to be wept for; and on account of the want of churches and schools, if help does not soon come, most of them will be led into grievous ways of error."

Mühlenberg appeared at Halle just when Francke was being urged to send help to the church people of Pennsylvania. Persuaded by the latter to cast his lot in America, he arrived in Philadelphia by way of Charleston on November 25, 1742. Here he found much confusion. Congregations and church people were distracted. What with the disturbing effects of vagabond preachers, the spellbinding influence of Whitefield, and the scheme of Zinzendorf, there was not much of an outlook for the church group, but Mühlenberg went to work in earnest. The Halle reports tell the story of his long journeys, of the organization of the church synod of 1748, consisting of six ministers and twenty-four delegates, and of his epoch-making efforts for the churches of America.

Mühlenberg, although he did not actually organize his synod until 1748, preceded Schlatter to America. On coming to Philadelphia in 1746 Schlatter hastened to pay his respects. He wrote in his journal:

I travelled from Philadelphia to Providence, a distance of thirty miles, and visited Rev. H. M. Mühlenberg, the first [foremost] Lutheran preacher in this country, who in the year 1742 was sent hither by the very Reverend Court Preacher, Ziegenhagen of London, on nearly the same footing with myself, and for the same object. I found it expedient to seek an understanding as to how it was necessary for me to act toward them in reference to the frequent intermarriages of these two denominations in these regions. His Reverence received me with all possible affection and brotherly kindness.

The two men remained on the friendliest terms throughout their lives.

When Schlatter went to Europe, he spoke everywhere in praise of the great Lutheran and his labors in America. After his return he visited Mühlenberg, who subsequently wrote to Halle: "On Tuesday, July 28, 1752, early at six o'clock, the Reformed minister, Rev. Schlatter, came to my house and embraced me according to the primitive custom of sincere friendship and love. In the night he had arrived safely in a ship from Holland and had brought with him six newly ordained preachers for Pennsylvania."

Turning again to the distinction between church people and sects and the contribution of each group to the religious life of colonial Pennsylvania, one may find it profitable to illustrate by an analogy drawn from our national history. In the village of Christiana, Lancaster county, there is a stone monument commemorating the Christiana riot of 1851, in which advocates and opponents of the fugitive slave law were killed. On one side of the monument we read, "These died for law," and on the other side, "These died for liberty." It may be said that the church people lived for law and order in church affairs, for conventionalities and customary procedures, for authority that alone can assure permanent and stable organization. The sects, on the other hand, lived for liberty. They chafed under outward authority of

any kind, whether civil or ecclesiastical. They were individualists who accepted only the law of conscience and their own literal interpretation of the law of God. Both groups were needed for the development of a well-balanced religious life, as both advocates of liberty and defenders of law are needed for a well-balanced national life.