Papers of the American Society of Church History

<http://journals.cambridge.org/PCH>

Additional services for *Papers of the American Society of Church History*:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)

Dr. Schaff and the Lutheran Church

Henry Eyster Jacobs

Papers of the American Society of Church History / Volume 6 / January 1894,
pp 13 - 19

DOI: 10.1017/S1079902800000681, Published online: 21 September 2009

Link to this article: [http://journals.cambridge.org/
abstract_S1079902800000681](http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S1079902800000681)

How to cite this article:

Henry Eyster Jacobs (1894). Dr. Schaff and the Lutheran Church.
Papers of the American Society of Church History, 6, pp 13-19
doi:10.1017/S1079902800000681

Request Permissions : [Click here](#)

DR. SCHAFF AND THE LUTHERAN CHURCH.

BY REV. HENRY EYSTER JACOBS, D.D., LL.D.

No theologian, we believe it can be confidently asserted, was so familiar with the life and history of the churches that have found a home in America, as was Dr. Schaff. His name was pre-eminently that which would have been given by an intelligent representative of any of the larger communions as that of the one scholar outside of his Church who best knew it. His rare intellectual activity, his unwearied habits of research, and his marvellous memory were aided by his constant personal contact with leaders of the various phases of religious thought, and his warm sympathy for what he deemed the most essential factors of religious life wherever found.

But while this is true of his relations to all denominations, it may be justly claimed that those which he bore to the Lutheran Church were peculiarly intimate. There was much in Lutheranism that did not attract him, and which he never ceased to frankly criticise. This rendered his discriminating praise all the more grateful, as *e. g.* where he says, in his book on *Germany: its Universities, Theology, and Religion*:

“Lutheran piety has its peculiar charm, the charm of Mary who ‘sat at Jesus’ feet and heard his word.’ If it is deficient in outward activity and practical zeal, and may learn much in this respect from the Reformed communion, it makes up for it by a rich inward life. It excels in honesty, kindness, affection, cheerfulness, and that *Gemüthlichkeit*, for which other nations have not even a name. The Lutheran Church meditated over the deepest mysteries of divine grace, and brought to light many treasures of knowledge from the mines of revelation. She can point to an un-

broken succession of learned divines who devoted their whole life to the investigation of saving truth. She numbers her mystics who bathed in the ocean of infinite love. She has sung the most fervent hymns to the Saviour, and holds sweet, child-like intercourse with the heavenly Father."

And of the Augsburg Confession, he wrote in his *Church History*¹:

"It is the most churchly, the most catholic, the most conservative creed of Protestantism."

Dr. Schaff had exceptional opportunities for learning to know the Lutheran Church. He came under its influence in Germany during his boyhood. While a student in the Gymnasium at Stuttgart, he lived in a Lutheran family, within whose house the most prominent pastors and most earnest representatives of Wurtemberg Lutheranism were often found. His course at three universities brought him into close contact with the prominent representatives of both the confessions, as well as of the Prussian Union. He learned to know the weaknesses, as well as the strength, of the forms of Lutheranism then struggling in Germany.

His historical tastes raised him even then above mere partisan interests. He did not conceive it to be his duty to exalt the importance of the Reformed Confession by depreciating that of the Lutheran Church. All his sympathies were on the side of the Union, while, at the same time, his close observation and philosophical training enabled him to notice antagonisms that could not be as readily adjusted as his heart desired. He writes:

"The two Churches of the Reformation do not absolutely contradict each other, but admit of an ultimate reconciliation. They agree in all the essential articles of faith, and even some of their most prominent differences are more of a theological and scholastic, than of a religious and practical nature. . . . But they represent, on the other hand, two distinct ecclesiastical individualities or types of Christianity. The difference is by no means confined, as

¹ Vol. vi., p. 708.

some suppose, to the doctrine of the Lord's Supper, and the divine decrees. On the contrary, it runs through the whole system, and affects more or less the entire theology, organization, worship, and practical piety. It rests, we may say, on a different psychological constitution, and national basis, as much so as the distinctive peculiarities of the Greek and the Latin Churches may be traced back to the difference between the ancient Greek and Roman nationalities."¹

Such were his convictions, doubtless already, when he came to America. His field of labor at Mercersburg, Pa., among the Reformed section of the Pennsylvania Germans, caused no diminution in his interest in the Lutheran Church, but only intensified it. The ideal before him was a vast one. It was the foundation and development of a German-American Church, uniting both confessions. The confusion between the two churches, which had existed in the Palatinate, whence a very large portion of the Pennsylvania Germans had emigrated, had been perpetuated. The rural churches were largely owned jointly by congregations of both confessions; the people were intermarried, and families of children divided according to the divergent confessions of their parents; a Union Hymn-Book for both confessions had been used; the Sunday Schools were Union Sunday Schools; and, not very many years before, it was seriously proposed to start a combined Lutheran and Reformed Theological Seminary, with a faculty to which each denomination should contribute an equal number of professors and directors. The project of a Union after the model of the Prussian Church had been suggested in influential quarters.

However earnest was Dr. Schaff's desire for a Union, he said that it must proceed from a basis different from that which had hitherto been contemplated. Nothing could be hoped for from mere indifferentism, or from any scheme that ignored plain historical facts. A German-American Church, in his view, was possible only in so far as it could

¹ *Germany: its Universities, etc.*, pp. 167 sqq.

find a firm historical basis upon which to rest. The ability to establish its claims historically was, in his opinion then, a better guarantee for its permanence and efficiency than any mere ideal interests that were presented. Accordingly, he established in 1848 the theological journal *Der Deutsche Kirchenfreund*, which bears on its title-page the inscription: "Organ for the common interests of the American-German Churches." His chief co-laborer in this publication was a Lutheran, his former fellow-student in Germany, who had followed him to America, and into the German Reformed Church in this country, viz. Dr. William Julius Mann. Into Dr. Mann's hands, after his return to the Lutheran Church, Dr. Schaff subsequently transferred the editorship. We need scarcely say that, under such editors, it was a journal of rare ability. It was a bond connecting the German scholarship of America with that of Germany, transmitting to America the ripest fruits of German learning, and frankly criticising American tendencies—especially those in the Lutheran and Reformed Churches—from the standpoint of those who, with a deep sympathy with American institutions, and thorough loyalty to the churches they represented, nevertheless could see how far these churches had drifted, or were in danger of drifting, from their moorings. Among the contributors were Dr. Schaff's distinguished colleague, Dr. J. W. Nevin, Bishop Reichel of the Moravian Church, and Dr. J. W. Alexander of the Presbyterian Church. Especially interesting and significant was a series of articles from the pen of the first editor on the history of the German Church in America, in which the denominational factor is assigned an entirely subordinate place.

Dr. Schaff, as an historian, was never satisfied with giving a *résumé* of facts, or even with constructing upon them theories. In all his books, he is neither a mere annalist, nor a mere philosopher. Much of their charm is to be traced to their frank and fearless criticism. We can appreciate and admire this, even when we regard his generalizations too rapid. This characteristic is seen, in all its strength, in

this earlier period. He had learned from his historical studies what Lutheranism was, and he was unwilling to accept the interpretation of those who thought that the Lutheran Church of a later period could make its own creed and call that Lutheranism. Historical fidelity required that both Lutheran and Reformed theologians either be recalled to their historical positions, or abandon the titles which designated those positions. The confessional antitheses had to be revived in the interests of Christian union, in order that the adherents of each side might understand the other. Otherwise, with the confusion indefinitely prolonged, the best attempts of union must fail. As his colleague, Dr. Nevin, wrote :

“A Christianity that ignores and rejects in full the Lutheran element, can never be sound and whole. . . . All who take an interest in American Christianity must deprecate the idea of its being permanently divorced from the deep rich wealth of the old Lutheran creed. Our Reformed theology needs, above all things just now, for its support and vigorous development, the felt presence of the great Lutheran antithesis, as it stood at the beginning.”¹

But the Lutheran Church of America of that period had, in great measure, lost its consciousness of its historical position. Dr. Schaff, with all plainness, exposed the inconsistencies of what he calls “those American Lutherans, who disown every distinctive doctrinal feature of Lutheranism.”² He found himself far more in harmony with Lutheran theology, than the leaders and spokesmen, in America, of what had hitherto been known in the English language as Lutheranism.

In his lectures on “America: Political, Social, and Religious,” delivered in Berlin in 1854, he presented an analysis of the various elements of which the Lutheran Church of that period was composed. However severely this was

¹ *Life of J. W. Nevin*, by Theodore Appel, pp. 308 sqq.

² *Germany: its Universities*, etc., p. 169.

criticised at the time, we believe that a careful review will show that he was in general correct. Those who know how deeply Dr. Schaff's heart was set upon Christian Union may at first seem surprised at the vigor with which he attacks a tendency then at its height, that especially gloried in its advocacy of such union. A union which he thought absolutely false to the facts of history was one with which he had no sympathy.

In the powerful reaction that came in the Lutheran Church in America, leading it back towards its historical foundations, the influence of Dr. Schaff must be regarded as a very important factor.

All this does not mean that Dr. Schaff was in full sympathy with the results that were reached. Dr. Schaff was not a Lutheran, and never ceased to protest against certain peculiarities in the Lutheran Church. He did not admire, we regret to say, the Formula of Concord; he was never convinced that the Lutheran Church did not teach consubstantiation; he introduces his protests against the Galesburg Rule at most unexpected places in his books. But there is not a Lutheran scholar in America, especially among those who use the English language, who does not owe to Dr. Schaff an inestimable debt. Dissent as we may from individual statements and opinions, oppose as we may movements that he regarded promotive of the progress of Christianity, when we consider the entire compass of his work in all its variety and richness and stimulus, we thank God that he lived and labored here so long, and that he has left his permanent impress upon the religious thought of America.

It is neither the exegete nor the dogmatician, who is of highest service in bringing together the various forms of Christianity, and effecting a reconciliation of divided interests. Theology is throughout an historical science, and it cannot be understood except by an historical interpretation. If the differences which separate Christian men are ever to be adjusted, it must be by the discriminating study of the mode in which the various Church parties and the various Church

doctrines have assumed their present forms. The result will be often that seeming agreements will be found to be heaven-wide disagreements, and, conversely, seeming contradictories will be found to be harmonies. Everything in Christianity must be brought to the touch-stone, not only of Holy Scripture, but also of history, and of a history so conscientious, that no link is overlooked and no fact suppressed.

The influence of this high standard of Dr. Schaff, which the Lutheran Church felt so soon, has pervaded an ever widening circle among the Christian scholars of America. We are convinced that it will not cease with his death. May we not look for the rise and development of an American school of Church historians, to continue the work which he began, with results of the highest moment to our common Christianity?