

# Early Attempts at Church Union in America

By

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## EARLY ATTEMPTS AT CHURCH UNION IN AMERICA

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THE eighteenth century was noted rather for the rise of new denominations than the union of old ones. Nevertheless it is not to be forgotten that attempts at union were made even though they were unsuccessful. It has taken nearly two hundred years for us in America to work out a plan of federation such as was attempted at Philadelphia in the early part of December, 1908. Federal Union was unknown, unthought of, in those early days. Organic union was the kind most generally considered. And this greatly increased the difficulties of forming church unions, as denominations were not generally willing to give up their peculiarities or their independence. I wish to speak of two efforts at church union especially connected with my own church, the German Reformed Church, leaving it for others to speak of other efforts that may have been made in the early history of America. In this age when church union is in the air it is certainly not unsuitable to study these early movements.

The first attempt at church union to which I shall refer was the attempt made by Count Zinzendorf in 1742 to unite all the German denominations and sects in Pennsylvania into a union of which the Moravians would be the leading

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factor. It was a magnificent dream of this idealistic Christian, but the time was not yet ripe for it. It was based on the Moravian idea of "tropes" or circles of believers. The idea of the trope they drew from Philippians i., 18, where "tropos" (trope) is translated by "way." Their idea of tropes was that members of other denominations could remain in their denominations but could form circles that were in connection with the Moravians. Thus at Geneva in Switzerland the Moravians founded a trope in the Reformed Church, which afterwards, however, withdrew to form a Moravian church. With this idea Count Zinzendorf attempted to organize the German denominations and sects of Pennsylvania. He could the more easily do this with the Lutherans and the Reformed: for he claimed to be a Lutheran, as he adhered to the Augsburg Confession, which the Moravians had adopted we believe; and also he had been ordained by a Reformed chaplain of the court of Prussia, Jablonsky, who was also a bishop of the Moravian Church. And then, too, his plan of tropes was in harmony with a peculiarity of the German Reformed, especially along the upper Rhine, the *ecclesiola in ecclesiâ*, the little church of believing, earnest Christians in the midst of the large state congregation. After Zinzendorf's arrival in America, Henry Antes, the prominent Reformed elder of Pennsylvania, issued a circular, Dec. 15, 1741 (O. S.), calling for a conference of the various bodies on Jan. 1, 1742 (O. S.), at Germantown. Most of the German bodies were represented at this conference, Lutherans, Reformed, Mennonites, Dunkards, Schwenckfelders, Moravians, Mystics, and Separatists. Only one sect sent regularly accredited delegates, the Seventh-Day Dunkards of Ephrata. There were 36 members of the conference, but more were present, some out of curiosity. The published minutes reveal harmony in these conferences, but the report given by Fresenius tells of important differences in them and of some strife at times.

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A second conference was held at Falkner Swamp, January 14 and 15, 1742 (O. S.). It was a smaller conference, to which only the Seventh-Day Dunkards sent delegates, the rest, as before, coming in their individual capacity. The third conference met at Oley, Feb. 10-12, 1742 (O. S.). Here the Seventh-Day Dunkards were not present. They however instead sent two letters on the subject of marriage. They withdrew from the conference because they evidently felt they could not gain the others to their peculiar notions of celibacy, the Lord's day, and immersion. But while they withdrew it is evident that the elements of the conference that remained were becoming more closely welded together, for the conference appointed four trustees. Also at this conference, for the first time a Quaker, a lady who made an address, was present, thus adding another sect. A remarkable event of this conference was the baptism of three Indians, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the first fruits of the Moravian work among the aborigines and the forerunner of many more trophies of that missionary church. After the Moravian fashion, they were baptized into "the wounds of Jesus." The fourth conference met at Germantown, March 10-12, 1742 (O. S.). It was a small conference of only twelve members present. The fifth conference was an important one, for it gave to this "Church of God in the Spirit," as the movement was now called, a creed. It was held at Germantown, April 6. This creed was a catechism based on the Bern articles of 1532, and was popularly named after Bechtel, the Reformed pastor of Germantown, who had joined this movement. But it was prepared by Zinzendorf. It contained 243 questions and was printed in German, English, and Swedish. Bechtel was ordained at this conference by Nitschman of the Moravian Church, he previously having had no ordination, having been by trade a turner. He was appointed, by this conference, inspector of the German Reformed churches of Pennsylvania. Another interesting feature of this conference was the appearance of

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a Moravian missionary, Israel, from St. Croix, West Indies. The sixth conference was held at Germantown, May 5-7, 1742. As the last conference had attempted to organize the Reformed in the union movement, this attempted to do the same for the Lutherans by the composition of a Lutheran Catechism and Constitution. The seventh conference was held at Philadelphia, June 2-3, 1742. But the union movement was waning, and what was left of it was consolidating with the Moravians.

Just at this critical moment a fortunate event occurred for the Moravians,—the arrival at Philadelphia of a shipload of 120 Moravian emigrants destined for the new Moravian settlement at Bethlehem, Pa. This colony joined the conference, which made it a larger body than any previous conference, and their presence completed the Moravian supremacy in the movement. A half year later, Count Zinzendorf sailed for Europe, Jan. 9, 1743. The scattered elements of this union continued for some years to work together under the control of the Moravians at Bethlehem. Several meetings were held of the Reformed and Lutheran tropes. Thus there are minutes of a Reformed trope being held as late as Aug. 12, 1746, at Philadelphia. Some Reformed, as Bechtel, Rauch, Brandmiller (and Lischy for a while), went into the movement as ministers. But two Reformed ministers strongly opposed the movement—Boehm the founder of the German Reformed Church in this country, and Guldin who had himself been a pietist and had been driven out of Bern, Switzerland, for his pietism. The coming of Muhlenberg to organize the Lutheran Church, and of Schlatter to organize the Reformed into a sort of synod (called a coetus) in 1747, completed the failure of the movement. They gathered the Lutherans and Reformed into their respective denominations. The Moravians gathered into their number those favorable to the union, and the various churches and sects each went its own way. So began and ended the first effort at union. Looked at from

this distance, after the subject of union has been developed into almost a science, it might be called a co-operative sort of organic union, as it had elements of both, and yet was not a complete organic union until its elements coalesced ultimately in the Moravians.

The second attempt at church union was of a different sort. Here the attempt was not between bodies so widely different as the Seventh-Day Dunkards and Reformed, and as the Schwenckfelders and the Lutherans. It was not a sentimental attempt like Zinzendorf's, but an ecclesiastical. It was an attempt to unite churches that were closely allied. It was no less an attempt than to unite all the Calvinistic churches of the presbyterial order in America, Dutch, Scotch, and German. Had it been carried out, these three denominations would now be one body. An earlier attempt to unite two of the Calvinistic churches had been made on April 27, 1738, at New York between the Dutch and the German Reformed. It got as far as to draw up a constitution. This together with their minutes was sent to Holland for approval. But the Holland fathers with their usual Dutch slowness took so much time for its consideration that it never came to any result.

The beginning of this movement originated across the Atlantic Ocean in Holland. The Reformed Church of the Netherlands, that great missionary church of the seventeenth century, having missions in the far east and the far west, was in the eighteenth century still supporting many Reformed churches in different parts of the world. Was there a poor persecuted Reformed church anywhere—they appealed to Holland and generally got relief. The German Reformed Church of Pennsylvania, in their destitution, thus came in connection with the Reformed Church of the Netherlands from 1725 to 1792. The Reformed Church of the Netherlands had been trying at this time to get more information about the Reformed churches in Pennsylvania and had tried to send several ministers to superintend the Pennsylvania churches.

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Nothing but Dutch patience and perseverance led them to continue trying to help these distant churches in the face of the difficulties that appeared. Finally, finding this so difficult, the deputies of the two synods of North and South Holland asked the Rev. P. H. Dorsius, a Dutch minister of Pennsylvania, who was then in Holland, whether the Dutch and German churches in Pennsylvania could not be united with the Presbyterian Church and thus the Church of the Netherlands be relieved of their expense and responsibility. They gave him two letters in September, 1743, one to the German congregations of Pennsylvania, urging them to unite. The other was to the Presbyterian Synod of Philadelphia. Dorsius came to America and laid the letter before the Presbyterian synod. On May 25, 1744, it took action and appointed a committee to write to the Church of the Netherlands, declaring their willingness to join the Calvinistic churches here. The committee consisted of the president of the synod, Rev. Mr. McHenry, and Revs. Andrews, Cross, and Evans, Jr. Mr. McHenry wrote June 14, 1744, to the Church of the Netherlands, and he also wrote to Rev. Mr. Kennedy, pastor of the Presbyterian church at Rotterdam in the Netherlands, who, as a Presbyterian, acted as a sort of intermediary between the deputies of the Netherlands Church and the Presbyterians of Philadelphia. Mr. McHenry's letter to the Holland synods was not received, for some reason, until April 28, 1745. The Dutch are proverbially slow. And the deputies, when they had received it, referred it to the synods. The synods, when they met that summer, simply referred the matter back to the deputies. Finally, on November 16, 1745, one of the deputies, Du Vignon, reported that he had had a long conference with Rev. Mr. Kennedy of Rotterdam, who thought there would be no trouble to bring about such a union in America.

But now difficulties began to appear. Denominations that are attempting to unite, as they get nearer together,



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often get farther apart. In courting, whether personal or ecclesiastical, the course of true love never runs smooth. Difficulties began to appear on both sides of the Atlantic. The leading minister of the German Reformed, John Philip Boehm, refused to go into the union for five reasons.

1. The Germans did not wish to give up their constitution, which had been adopted by a number of congregations.
2. They did not understand English, and so a union would be useless.
3. They did not want to give up their creed, the Heidelberg Catechism.
4. They were not willing to give up the Canons of Dort to which the congregations had been pledged.
5. They did not wish to give up the use of liturgical forms as at the sacraments and marriage, for among the Presbyterians all the services were free.

On some of these points, we believe, Boehm was too strenuous, and some he did not understand. Still we must not find too much fault with him. Church union was as yet a new science and existed then only in germ. To-day the question of language would be no hindrance, as the Presbyterians have a good many German congregations. And the Presbyterians to-day allow the use of the Heidelberg Catechism and the use of the liturgical forms if desired. Boehm's fears were not justified, but he reflected the spirit of his day.

Another difficulty appeared from the Dutch ministers in New York City. They were strongly Calvinistic and predestinarian. They looked with suspicion on the tendency, to what they, as Calvinists, supposed to be heterodoxy, on the part of the wing of the Presbyterians who followed Whitefield and were New-Measure men. However, this was not necessary, as the synod of Philadelphia was composed of conservative churchly Presbyterian, and not of the Whitefield, elements. Still they were suspicious and that suspicion made them halt.

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Another difficulty began to arise on the other side of the Atlantic. The synods of the Netherlands heard of the opposition of the Dutch ministers in New York and they referred the matter to the deputies for more information. When the Presbyterians in Pennsylvania heard of this, they felt themselves quite aggrieved that suspicion should be roused against their Calvinistic orthodoxy. One of their ministers, Rev. Mr. Cross, of Philadelphia, wrote October 16, 1746, to Rev. Mr. Kennedy of Rotterdam, defending the Presbyterian Synod of America against the charges. Notwithstanding this letter, all further attempts to unite these churches seem to have ceased. And thus the first attempt at union, 1744-46, ended.

But the matter was not permitted to rest entirely. In 1750 it came up again. At that time the Church of the Netherlands had an unfortunate church case on their hands, a church-quarrel in the German church at Philadelphia between the Schlatter and the Steiner parties. They felt themselves too far away to properly deal with the difficult case. And it occurred to them that the Presbyterian Church of America would be able to look after it better than they, as it was on the ground. Churches like individuals like to get out of difficulties by transferring them to the shoulders of others. So the deputies asked the South Holland synod about reviving the subject of union. The classis of Leyden seconded this and the South Holland synod approved it. The North Holland synod expressed itself pleased with it, but referred it to the deputies for more information. In 1751, four of the classes overtured the South Holland synod in favor of such a union. That synod urged Rev. Mr. Schlatter, now the leader of the German Reformed Church, to bring about such a union. He, in a letter dated May, 1751, expresses himself favorably to it, but says the ignorance of the Germans and their obstinacy and their misgivings prevent it, as they looked upon it as a change of religion. It is to be remembered that many of

the Germans had come to this country for liberty of conscience, and they were jealous on that point and would not be easily coerced. But again opposition arose. In the North Holland synod it was said that the Presbyterian Church of Pennsylvania was not the same as the Presbyterian Church of Scotland with which the Dutch were in correspondence. It was said that the Presbyterians in America were an independent denomination, without creed or church government or liturgy. (They seem to have confused them with the Congregationalists.) It therefore declined to enter into the union. This was followed the next year by a similar action by the South Holland synod.

So failed all efforts at church union, and Calvinists—Dutch, Scotch, and German—remained separated. Rev. Dr. Briggs, in his *American Presbyterianism*, page 244, lays the blame of this failure on the Old School or Conservative Presbyterians, who forced out the Whitefieldians, and thus caused a division of Presbyterians about that time which prevented this union of Calvinists. But Dr. Briggs did not have at hand the Holland correspondence first published in 1896. There it is evident that the failure was due to the suspicions of the Dutch ministers of New York and of the Netherlands Church about the Whitefieldians. So it was not the Old School Calvinists, but the New School who prevented the union.

Dr. Briggs suggests (page 288) that its failure caused the Presbyterians in America to forfeit their peculiar supremacy on this continent. We are not quite ready to go as far as that. But there is no doubt that the union would have greatly solidified and aided the Presbyterian elements here, over against any attempts by the Episcopacy to become a state church in the colonies. As it was, the American Revolution has an ecclesiastical aspect. It was caused by the Calvinists. It was the Baptists, Congregationalists, and Presbyterians of various phases united together against royalty. The only denomination not Calvinistic, that in the

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main was favorable to independence, was the Lutheran. But the Episcopalians and Methodists stood by the king. Had this union of which we speak occurred, it would still further have strengthened the hand of the Calvinists politically at that time. And we believe Calvinism in America would have been stronger to-day.

In conclusion permit me to remark that this study of early attempts at church unions is interesting because it reveals the church was like a child, learning to creep, before it can walk, on so great a subject as church union. Since that time different forms of church union have appeared, Co-operation, Federation, Fusion. (Cesar Malan used to have a sort of proverb which he liked to quote: "Fusion—confusion; union—communion." He separated fusion and union, which are now looked upon as the same.) But since those early days not merely have these general forms of union appeared, but also many shades of each of them. And the whole subject has been analyzed and synthesized until now we have attempted unions of all kinds—federations such as the Great Federation which met in Philadelphia in 1908; organic union such as between the Northern and Cumberland Presbyterians. And now an organic union with a federal appendage is suggested between the Presbyterians and the German Reformed, although it is too early to speak of it yet. Let the work go on. Church union is a great problem viewed from the historian's standpoint. Any advance is a great gain. The twentieth century will work out new phases of it as did the nineteenth. In all these movements we can see the hand of God manifest, who is leading the Church whither He will.