

CHAPTER 7

FROM THE CONTINENT OF EUROPE: THE EVANGELICAL AND REFORMED STORY

Immigration rather than colonization is the frame of reference for understanding the Evangelical and Reformed story in American church life. While that history does have a colonial phase, its formative elements are derived chiefly from a later period, when the nation was being molded by vast waves of immigration. The role of colonial influence gains significance when considered from the perspective of denominational development in the nineteenth century.

It was English colonization that made the Evangelical and Reformed story possible. The German people who formed the parent bodies of this denomination were among the vast numbers of emigrants from the Continent who used the "bridge" built between the Old World and the New by England's colonizing efforts. While they were already the largest group of non-English immigrants in colonial days, their numbers in the nineteenth century had an "exodus" dimension.*

The German experience in America is, therefore, the context of Evangelical and Reformed history.† This is paralleled, of course, by the Lutherans, Roman Catholics, and sectarian groups who comprised so large a proportion of the German immigrant population. While social historians have treated various aspects of this experience, it is important for the purposes of this book to call attention also to the special religious circumstances of the German migration. In many respects these provide a sharp contrast with the English situation and are, therefore, determinative of the German experience.

For most immigrants from the Continent, America was as much a land of

*Population in the English colonies is estimated at nearly three million by the time of Independence in 1776. Natural increase was augmented by a steady flow of immigrants from the British Isles and Germany. After 1800 the tide of immigrants swelled. It is estimated that more than thirty-six million came from the Continent between 1820 and 1970, with Germany supplying the largest number from any single country. That figure is nearly seven million.

†This does not overlook the fact that among the Reformed element in the Evangelical and Reformed Church there were also Swiss and Hungarian people. The Swiss, of course, were from the German cantons of Switzerland. Further, there were other national groups of the Reformed tradition—chiefly Dutch and French.

refuge as of opportunity. This was especially true for the Germans, who were literally refugees from war, poverty, and religious persecution in the early part of the eighteenth century. In later emigrations, particularly in the nineteenth century, the factor of war was less significant, but poverty, due chiefly to overpopulation, and religious persecution—although of lesser severity—continued to make America appear a haven of freedom and opportunity.

Religious conflict among the major church groups in Germany produced turmoil and fear if not outright persecution. The intimate ties between the churches and the civil governments of the several German states exacerbated all social and political issues, especially through the eighteenth century. Although the Peace of Westphalia, in 1648, had theoretically settled the traditional animosities of Lutheran, Reformed, and Catholic churches, the religious loyalties of rulers continued the struggles. The religious factor undoubtedly lay behind the ferocity of the armies of Louis XIV of France in the Rhineland in 1689 and again in 1701-14 in the War of the Spanish Succession. In the nineteenth century such religious strife was replaced by subtle political oppression in connection with the rising German national consciousness.

Because the German experience in America embraces two and one half centuries of this nation's history, the Evangelical and Reformed story may be viewed in three phases: the colonial, the national, and the church union phase. All three belong to the experience of the German Reformed people, while only the national and the union phases apply to the German Evangelical people. The Reformed group's colonial experience set them apart from the nineteenth-century German arrivals. At the same time the latter group, including both Reformed and Evangelical Germans, brought a new and significant dimension of the German experience into American church life.

THE COLONIAL PHASE: REFORMED

No national monument such as Plymouth Rock marks the location of the first contingent of German Reformed immigrants settling in this land. Early groups came in 1710 to the Carolinas, Virginia, Maryland, New Jersey, and New York. Some were Swiss Germans from northern Switzerland; others were known as Palatines from the upper Rhine area designated as the Rhenish-Palatinate, with Heidelberg as the center. Pennsylvania became the chief place of settlement after word of intolerable conditions in New York filtered back to Europe from some of the Palatinate Reformed people who had found a better situation in William Penn's colony.¹ From that time on the flow of German immigrants through the port of Philadelphia was almost continuous.

Who were these German Reformed people from the Palatinate? They were, first of all, refugees from intolerable living conditions in the fatherland, where grinding poverty, continually aggravated by wars, an unstable economy, and a period of severe climactic conditions, resulted in thousands (estimated at more

than 15,000) fleeing to England in 1709. There, because of the naturalization act which enabled foreign Protestants to become English citizens, these refugee Germans soon were the beneficiaries and sometimes victims of the colonization fever that was touching not only enterprising business interests but the Crown as well. In any case, the new colonies in America seemed a perfect solution to the refugee problem faced by the English government.

Great numbers of these people came to America as "redemptioners," that is, as people who had sold their time and service for a specified number of years in order to pay for their transportation across the ocean. Others came penniless, if not debt-free. All were laborers, farmers, tradespeople and artisans. Their hope for a better life lay in the promise of America's open spaces and uncrowded communities, where individual initiative, no matter what social class, was respected and rewarded.

Of greater significance for this account was the Reformed faith of a large portion of these Palatine emigres.² The Palatinate area of Germany was dominantly Reformed, but large numbers of Lutherans lived there as well and emigrated with their Reformed neighbors. Lutheran and Reformed relations, so strained and strife-filled in the Palatinate up through the middle of the seventeenth century, had become more peaceable in the latter half. This was due in part to the legal recognition accorded to the Reformed faith by the Treaty of Westphalia of 1648 but also in part to the unity produced by a common enemy—in this case the armies of Catholic France in the wars of the last two decades of the century. Religious differences receded in the common determination of these Palatines to escape the hopeless cycle of war, poverty, and oppression. They took their religious convictions and practices with them to the New World and demonstrated their common lot frequently by erecting church buildings that served both Reformed and Lutheran congregations.

These German Reformed forebears came, then, not primarily for religious reasons. They did not see themselves undertaking an "errand into the wilderness" as did their English Reformed cousins who had settled in New England almost one hundred years earlier. Consequently, they were not accompanied by clergy, in contrast with the Puritans, who from the beginning were helped by clergy to shape both the religious and civil life of the communities they established. They came, nevertheless, as Protestant Christians who had been nurtured in the Reformed faith for generations. Their chief religious distinction was that they were a people of the *Heidelberg Catechism*. Use of that devotional book in their families and in their corporate worship developed in them a piety characterized by fervent discipleship. Because of their Calvinist roots they too were as a people "possessed by God." This gave them a sense of security as well as of responsibility in the building of a new life in America.

Organization of church life in many of the new German Reformed settlements proceeded slowly in the absence of pastors and of any civil authorities to

assume that responsibility. For many, family worship served as the means of sustaining the faith. Equipped with the *Catechism* and the *Bible*, they maintained their faith tradition until pastors were available. In this they exhibited the strength of the piety they had learned in their homeland.

Although some Dutch Reformed ministers served German settlements in adjacent states, Pennsylvania Germans had to wait for some time for pastoral care from their own number. James I. Good cites the work of the Rev. Paul Van Vlecq, a Dutch Reformed pastor at Neshaminy in Bucks County, who visited Skippack and White Marsh in 1710, where he organized a congregation and baptized children.³ This congregation, which met in the house of a devout Dutch elder, later disbanded but then was reestablished in 1725. Samuel Guldin, a Swiss-German minister, is known to have preached and provided pastoral care among the German Reformed people, although he never served organized congregations.

The distinction of establishing and serving the first German Reformed churches in Pennsylvania apparently goes to two laymen, both trained school-teachers. John Philip Boehm—most remembered for his lengthy and constructive service—and Conrad Templeman yielded to the religious needs of the people and began their “ministry” as lay readers. Thus, the “Church in Pennsylvania owes its origin to pious laymen.”⁴ Apparently Templeman was never ordained, but Boehm sought ordination after some years of pastoral service. The circumstances of this ordination had bearing upon the next sixty years of German Reformed church life; they were also significant in their exhibition of the principles of church organization that prevailed among these people.

Boehm’s diligent and highly respected service as an unordained pastor became historically significant, when on October 15, 1725 he conducted the service of the Lord’s Supper at the request of the members of the congregation he had organized at Falkner Swamp, a congregation continuing even now. He was not unconcerned about ordination, for as a Reformed church member he recognized that the authority to administer the sacraments came not from the individual congregation of laypeople but from the wider church composed of both clergy and laity. Circumstances, however, prevailed over his scruples.

Three years later Boehm sought and received ordination from the Dutch Reformed Church through the Classis of Amsterdam, which was then responsible for the Dutch churches in America. By that action the German Reformed churches established a relationship with the Dutch church that was to last for sixty-five years.⁵ The relationship was more pastoral than governmental, partly because of the difficulties of communication at so great a distance and partly as a result of the less rigid and more irenic temper of the Palatinate Germans. Unquestionably the relationship was of great benefit to the German Reformed churches. At one point the Dutch Church in New Jersey encouraged the idea of

making the German churches an integral part of their own Coetus.* The Germans in Pennsylvania, however, resisted the overture. The Holland churches, nevertheless, did care for their sister German churches in America by sending funds, maintaining procedures for regularizing the ministry, and receiving reports. When delays in communication hindered their efforts, they suggested that the German churches join the Presbyterians, but when that suggestion came to nought, they continued to help.

Perhaps the truly significant contribution of the Reformed Church in Holland to the German churches in America was the appeal made to the Palatinate Consistory for a German-speaking minister, which resulted in the sending of the Rev. Michael Schlatter to America. Schlatter, a German-Swiss minister, was deputized by the Holland synod to “organize the ministers and congregations into a coetus” and, in general, to supervise the German Reformed churches.⁶ This action proved to be providential in every respect. While individual congregations had generally been well organized by Boehm after the Palatinate model, the absence of a higher body of authority had made these churches vulnerable to the work of the “sectaries” and “enthusiasts,” who were especially active in the 1730s.

The arrival of Michael Schlatter in the summer of 1746 marked the beginning of a constructive period of church formation among German Reformed people. Within the year Schlatter had fulfilled one of his major assignments—the formation of the Coetus of the Reformed Ministerium of Congregations in Pennsylvania. Its model was that of the Dutch churches in New York, providing an organizational structure that enabled the churches to govern themselves while maintaining a proper ecclesiastical relationship with the church in the fatherland.

Schlatter’s role in the organization of the Coetus was not so much that of a designer as it was of an organizer and administrator. Boehm also should receive credit since the Coetus used the organizational constitution that he had devised for the congregations. This was adopted in 1748. The document, the *Kirchen-Ordnung of 1748*, adapted from the constitution Boehm had prepared in 1725, sets forth an order of church life exhibiting the characteristic features of the Reformed tradition that had developed in the upper Rhineland of Germany and in Switzerland.

The care and discipline of the church as a spiritual community was in the hands of the elders and deacons along with the minister. Having been elected by the congregation, these individuals constituted the consistory, the official body to whom the members entrusted authority and responsibility. Upon the conscience of members and officers alike was laid the responsibility of “fraternal correction and mutual edification.” Upon the minister was placed responsibility for preaching

*Coetus, a Latin word for a synod, but in the Dutch system not having the powers thereof.

the pure doctrine of the Reformed Church according to the Word of God and to administer *the holy seals* (sacraments) of the *Covenant* at their appointed time and place; always to adhere to the confession of faith of the Reformed churches and to the *Heidelberg Catechism*, to explain the same . . . , to hold catechetical instruction. . . . He shall give special attention to *church discipline and correct practice, together with those who have oversight of the congregation.*⁷

In adapting this order for use in the Coetus, the Reformed churches extended the principles of government by ministers and elders from the local congregation to the larger body of churches. This left undisturbed the internal life of the individual congregations that were under their own consistories. At the same time the extension of this form of government to the Coetus protected the local churches from unscrupulous religious entrepreneurs by regularizing admission and ordination to the ministry. Moreover, it provided desperately needed mutual support in common identity and faith practice. Undergirding it all was commitment to the shared responsibility of clergy and laity together in ordering the life of the church under Christ the Lord. It was democracy at work within the framework of a community of faith under a sovereign Lord. Recognition of that sovereignty was expressed in reliance upon Word and Sacrament and upon the responsibility for fraternal correction and mutual edification.⁸

The results of this organizational step for German Reformed churches in eastern Pennsylvania were salutary throughout the difficult years of religious turmoil engendered by the German sects and also by the disruptive circumstances of the American Revolution. Under such tumultuous conditions the nurture of faith and the Christian life was made possible by the "church" character of the faith experience in contrast to the individualistic exercises encouraged by the sects. The Coetus period of organization provided the organizational experience that led to denominational formation in 1793.⁹

Comparatively little is known of any significant theological and intellectual efforts of these people during the colonial period. In this the contrast to the Puritans in New England is pronounced. Several reasons are apparent: a less-educated lower class, a much smaller number of clergy, and less homogeneity in the total area. Penn's colony had drawn highly diverse groups, making common cause difficult. Whereas New England through the seventeenth and most of the eighteenth century was almost totally English, Pennsylvania drew the English, Dutch, Germans, and Scots-Irish. Religious identity inevitably required a parochial style of life, with its consequent absence of intellectual ferment. The relatively small number of clergy had overwhelming pastoral tasks and were not given to writing theological dissertations. Finally, the German Reformed people were not agitated by the same theological and ecclesiological issues facing their English cousins.

However, the effects of eighteenth-century Pietism in Europe were felt espe-

cially among these Reformed people from about 1770 onward. In part this was due to a number of new ministers arriving from Germany who had been trained in the pietistic centers of that country. Out of this tendency in Pennsylvania came the movement that prepared the way for the work of Philip William Otterbein and the eventual break that established the United Brethren Church.

Concern about education, however, prevailed among all these German people. Schoolmasters were among them, Boehm and Templeman being prominent examples. Parish schools were regularly conducted. Still there was not enough education. Their concern and plight stirred the English, who were aroused through the efforts of David Thomson, pastor of the English Reformed Church in Amsterdam, and organized "The Society for Propagation of the Knowledge of God among the Germans."¹⁰ The generous response of the English churches to this need in their colonies resulted in the establishment of many charity schools in Pennsylvania. They were the forerunners of the public school system. Michael Schlatter, after dissociating himself from the Coetus, headed the charity school enterprise for a time and was called by one historian the "first superintendent of public instruction in Pennsylvania."¹¹

German Reformed involvement in public affairs was limited both by the tradition of their homeland and by the language barrier. As settlers they had common cause with the English in their defense against Indian attacks. Pledges of loyalty to the Crown were given without question. At the same time they were cautious about the Crown's exercise of authority, and when Pennsylvania was considering a change from proprietary to Crown rule, they exercised their voting rights and came out against the Crown. By the time of the War of Independence they were thoroughgoing "Americans." In keeping with the Reformed tradition of public responsibility, they became increasingly involved in the welfare of the colonies, both in the war itself and in expressions of concern for the emerging new nation.¹² James I. Good cites a "memorial of congratulation to General Washington on his election as president."¹³

Independence for the nation created the atmosphere for the independence of the German Reformed churches from the Reformed Church in Holland. The difficulties of communication created continual frustration over the years but surprisingly little dissension. Nevertheless, the problems had an inhibiting effect. As the Coetus grew in its own self-awareness and self-confidence, reliance upon the Holland churches was less significant. In the postwar period, as the nation shaped its own government, the Reformed churches began to think of their responsibilities, in which the Dutch Church could have little part.

A formal relationship was maintained on two levels with the Holland ecclesiastical authorities: the ordination of ministers and the reporting of all actions to the Dutch church. By 1791 the German Reformed churches were ready to declare themselves on their own. The action to do this reflected no hostility but simply maturity. It was voted: "That the coetus has the right at all

times to examine and ordain those who offer themselves as candidates for the ministry, without asking or waiting for permission to do so from the fathers in Holland."¹⁴ It was not until 1793 that the formal ties were broken. At the gathering of that year, the Coetus was transformed into a synod by the adoption of a constitution or "Synodal Ordnung" and of a name, *The Synod of the German Reformed Church in the United States of America*, and the appointment of a committee to prepare a hymnbook.¹⁵

Thus, the German Reformed churches entered the denominational stream of American church life as the eighteenth century drew to a close. Both the church and the nation were entering a new era. It was a time of new beginnings, of learning the burden and the opportunity of self-government, of facing unanticipated responsibilities. As the new church body moved into the nineteenth century, it entered what Kenneth Scott Latourette called "The Great Century," which witnessed "the most extensive geographic spread of Christianity."¹⁶

THE NATIONAL PHASE: REFORMED

By all accounts the formation of denominational Protestantism through the nineteenth century in America was an exceedingly complex experience for most church bodies. This was no less true for the German Reformed people, who were entering that century with a new and untested synodical organization. Their experience of the national phase* of American Protestant development quite naturally exhibits the strains and challenges faced by all the churches as the nation developed. It was true of them as it was of others that the colonial period was largely a time of regrouping and reordering for tasks that were just beginning to loom over the horizon.¹⁷ At the same time theirs was a very different experience from that of the Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and Disciples particularly, for whom the national period was a time of unprecedented expansion.

Two circumstances of the general American religious scene of that period require concentrated attention in tracing the development of The Synod of the German Reformed Church. They are: first, the American religious temper, which had been shaped initially by the Great Awakening of the 1730s and 40s and which came to full maturity in the Second Awakening about 1792 to 1801; and second, church expansion and growth resulting partly from the Awakening impulses, but chiefly from the massive waves of immigration from 1830 to the end of the century. The responses of the German Reformed Church to these circumstances exhibit both the essence of the faith tradition it represented and the way in which the sociocultural ethos of the growing nation defined limits as well as opportunities for that tradition. Before discussing the impact of these

*The term national phase is used to designate the period in which the American people developed national character.

circumstances, however, attention should be given to some of the internal concerns faced by the new Synod.

It was a relatively small Synod that entered the ranks of American denominations at the turn of the century. J.H. Dubbs reported twenty-two ministers at that time, although only thirteen were present at the organization on April 27, 1793.¹⁸ In another report it was estimated that there were one hundred seventy-eight churches with 15,000 communicants. In addition, there were many people of German Reformed background who counted themselves as such but apparently were not listed as communicant members.

Critical issues confronted the fledgling Synod, not least of which was the general spiritual malaise cited earlier. Related to that was anxiety among the clergy, especially concerning what was called "widespread infidelity," with Thomas Paine as the object of many charges of destroying the "faith." In addition, there were internal problems facing the Synod that tended to be very divisive. Two deserve attention at this point: the language issue and the seminary issue.

All immigrant churches have found the language question troublesome if not explosive. Ethnic identity in a foreign land requires use of the mother tongue. But that in itself retards and often prohibits the cultural accommodation that enables ethnic groups to participate in the life of the nation that has opened its space to them. In the closely knit life of the immigrant churches, where ethnicity tends to be a critical factor of religious devotion, the mother tongue is often defended with ferocity. The question became critical for the German Reformed churches at the beginning of the national phase of its development and at several stages later.

Although the Synod encountered the language question as early as 1804, it was the swelling of the immigrant tide toward the end of the second decade that resulted in split congregations. The Synod itself used the German language officially in its proceedings and minutes until 1825. David Dunn comments on the consequences:

The conclusion can hardly be avoided that the tenacity with which large sections of the German Reformed Church clung to the language of their fathers had much to do with the slow pace at which consciousness of being an American denomination developed. It surely had something to do with the reluctance and opposition with which the more dyed-in-the-wool German sections of the church met the challenges to educational and missionary enterprise that the new century presented. The loss of congregations, families, and individuals to English-using denominations, while it cannot be measured in statistics, was undoubtedly very large.¹⁹

The continual dearth of ministers had plagued German Reformed churches from earliest days, and in the first decades of the Synod's life this led to the seminary issue. James I. Good gives considerable detailed information about

the personal as well as the organizational issues.²⁰ Underlying the whole matter were subtle concerns relating to ethnic identity and the perennial issue of authority in churches in a voluntary society. It is impossible to separate these concerns. Suffice it to say that the seminary issue, although of great importance for the future, was simply one aspect of the struggles that the German Reformed Church experienced in becoming an American denomination. The most obvious negative result was the synodical split in 1822, when a "Free Synod" was formed. The positive result, though much delayed by the controversy, was the establishment of the seminary in 1825 at Carlisle, Pennsylvania. As was the case with many denominational seminaries, this one moved several times: in 1829 to York, in 1837 to Mercersburg, and in 1853 to Lancaster, where it came to be known as Lancaster Theological Seminary.

Quite obviously, the organizational structure of the Synod underwent important changes in the years of dealing with such issues. Some of the changes, however, were of a developmental nature, reflecting simply the growth of the Synod in numbers of churches and ministers. In 1819 the Synod acted to establish area groups of churches known as classes (a term corresponding to presbyteries in a structural sense). A committee recommended that:

Because of the rapid growth of the population of the United States many Reformed congregations have been organized, and because it is our great desire that all regular ministers of our church in the United States shall be united by an inseparable bond of union, and because our church has spread far and wide, thus making synodical activities ever more difficult, and because some of the brethren have great distances to cover . . . Synod shall be divided into classes.²¹

Adoption of the recommendation also required a restructuring of the Synod, defining the responsibilities of the classes, their relationship to the Synod, and the manner of election of delegates to the same. Initially, eight classes were formed and others added as the years went by.

Of greater importance at this point of the discussion of the synodical organization are the divisions that took place in 1822 and in 1824. Reference was made above to the formation of the Free Synod over the seminary issue. That synod was, of course, within the same geographical area as the mother Synod. In 1824 the Ohio Classis, located chiefly west of the Allegheny River, separated from the Synod over the question of the right to ordain ministers. Although distance and communication problems were primary factors here, an underlying impulse was the growing self-consciousness of the "western" churches of the German Reformed tradition. The traditions inherited from the colonial period were more important to the churches in eastern Pennsylvania than they were to the newly formed churches in Ohio.

Actually, separating tendencies, whether exacerbated by local circumstances or a changing cultural ethos, are relatively insignificant in German Reformed

history generally.* First of all, they simply were not congruent with the Reformed understanding of the church. Thus, the Free Synod returned to the mother Synod in 1837, and the Ohio Synod (originally a classis, but then a synod as it organized other classes in expanding westward) in 1863 became a part of the General Synod. However, it is important to note that already in the 1840s there is a countervailing tendency to separation. Bard Thompson calls attention to a rising denominational self-consciousness as expressed in sermons delivered at the various Synod gatherings at that time.²² One preacher declared that "the time for . . . union with any other denomination has passed away," and that the Reformed Church "wants no further Reformation." Strange statements indeed from those who belonged to the Calvinist tradition!

Denominational identity was the chief concern of almost all Protestant groups in that period. In one way or another religious diversity connected with religious vitality produced the need to be identified. In the German Reformed Church this led to the formation of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in the United States in 1863. The occasion was the Tercentenary Celebration of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, a most appropriate time from any point of view within the Reformed tradition. For the *Catechism* continued to be the primary molding agent of the Reformed expression of the Calvinist tradition among German people. Here its unifying power was at work, a point to remember when a scholastic tendency and a form of *Heidelberg Catechism* orthodoxy later became a divisive element.

The internal issues and organizational development of the German Reformed Church in the period from the first synodical organization in 1793 to the formation of the General Synod in 1863 are of considerable significance in themselves. At the same time they do not account for the clearer self-understanding, the increased commitment to the Reformed tradition, and the emerging sense of "place" in the American denominational picture that were exhibited in the years following the Civil War. That accounting requires a closer examination of the American religious temper of the times and the experience of growth resulting from immigration.

By the second decade of the nineteenth century the American religious temper was all-pervasive, quickly affecting newly arrived immigrant groups. Produced by the First and Second Great Awakenings, drawing its understanding of human nature as much from the Enlightenment as from the Reformation tradition, it had become at one and the same time the source of impressive religious vitality and the bane of organized religious life. That temper was characterized—and still is largely so in this twentieth century—by primary accent

*While the exceptions seem to be the United Brethren movement involving Philip William Otterbein and the Church of God movement involving John Winebrenner, both over revival measures, the fact is that small numbers were involved in each case.

upon the individual's religious experience and consciousness. The result was the absolute individual and a depreciation of the reality and place of the church in religious experience.

It was precisely at this point that American religious temper and German Reformed piety clashed. For although Reformed piety did involve an inward discipline in which the experience of grace became real in the transformation of life, that discipline and experience were always set in the context of the church where Word and Sacrament countered subjectivistic tendencies. The dilemma of the German Reformed church member in the early part of the nineteenth century was real and often painful. Should one seek reassurance from an "experience" generated by the intense excitement of revivalistic preaching, or from the promise of God expressed by the church in Word and Sacrament? It is not surprising that the earnestness of a people made devout over the years by disciplined living would be susceptible to the persuasions of those who made the experience of salvation the criterion of the Christian life.

The records of the German Reformed Church in the first half of the nineteenth century reveal the confusion and turmoil produced by revivalism. At the same time the countervailing tendencies inherent in the Reformed understanding of the church moved the churches in a direction opposite from the prevailing American religious mood and practice. That is the real significance of the development and strengthening of the synodical organization leading up to the General Synod in 1863. It is important to see this, however, in relation to parallel tendencies in other church bodies, where subjective, individualistic religious activity was also seen as continually divisive. A growing recognition of the need for a "well-organized and self-conscious church that possessed authority" lay behind the "church" reaction to revivalism in the second quarter of the century.²³

One of the clearest examples and primary forces behind this renewed accent on the church was produced within the German Reformed Church. Known as the Mercersburg Theology, or Movement, since its exponents were the faculty of the seminary at Mercersburg, this theological perspective had an immeasurable influence on American Protestantism generally as well as on the German Reformed Church. Of special significance is the fact that it laid the foundations of evangelical catholicity and Christian unity, which became a focal concern of Protestant Christianity decades later. It was the German Reformed Church's first major contribution to the cause of unity in the struggle against sectarianism. Commenting generally about this and parallel perspectives in the midnineteenth century, Lefferts Loetscher asserts: "A more ultimate and far more constructive consequence of their churchly emphasis was the preservation of the classical Reformation and pre-Reformation heritages for a day when Christian unity could be explored in its larger dimensions."²⁴

The moving spirits of the Mercersburg Theology were John Williamson

Nevin and Philip Schaff. Nevin, of Scots-Irish background, had come to Mercersburg in 1840 from the Presbyterian seminary at Pittsburgh. He was followed four years later by Schaff, a Swiss-German. Although both were of the Reformed tradition, neither was native to the German Reformed Church. Yet their theological initiative and creativity found a congenial response in a church body prepared for them by the *Heidelberg Catechism*. This is not to pass over the controversy and struggle engendered by their work. That controversy was an inevitable consequence of the clash between the American religious temper, which had left its mark on the Reformed churches, and the church theology of Nevin and Schaff, which exposed the real significance of the *Catechism* so widely used and long cherished.

When the heat of controversy had dissipated, it was clear that the Mercersburg Theology had made an impression. True, not all German Reformed people could accept the new perspective. They were the "Old Reformed," in whom the American religious temper had taken firm hold. But the Mercersburg heritage had been woven into the experience and the theological tradition of the Reformed Church in a way that would become evident in the commitment and "attitude toward Christian unity" so characteristic of that body in the twentieth century.²⁵ Nevin and Schaff had succeeded in their attempt

to recover the Reformation in its catholic dimensions, the Reformed doctrine of the Eucharist, the stature of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, the liturgical basis of Reformed worship, the sense of Reformed churchmanship. To the American church as a whole, they opened a vast new historical perspective.²⁶

The special significance of the Mercersburg Movement for gaining perspective upon the role of the German Reformed Church tradition in the shaping of the United Church of Christ lies in the convergence of three forces in American church life at that time. The first is represented in the *Heidelberg Catechism* ethos, which Nevin adopted and expounded. Schaff represents the second force as he brought to bear upon the issues of the churches in America the fruits of the "singular burst of scholarly and theological energy in nineteenth-century Germany."²⁷ The third force was the increased German-American consciousness brought on by the massive German immigration of the middle decades of the century.

Nevin's use of the *Heidelberg Catechism* ethos seemed to some an introduction of foreign elements, particularly a Romanizing tendency. Such charges came from those whose religious orientation had become highly individualistic and subjective. They reacted to Nevin's recovery of the organic nature of the church, his Calvinist interpretation of the eucharist, and his insistence upon the unbroken historical continuity of the church, including medieval catholicism. Whatever excesses Nevin's theology seemed to be for some, his recovery of the *Catechism* for the church was salutary in every way.

When Schaff came to America in 1844, he was already recognized in Europe

as a most promising scholar. He had not only been trained in the vigorous German "church" theology of that time—including experiences that made him more cosmopolitan than many of his German theological contemporaries—but he also shared the emerging German theological self-confidence of the nineteenth century. This made Schaff an unusually acute observer of the American scene. Further, it equipped him to be an interpreter of the significance of the "German experience" in American church life at the very time that German immigration was changing the face of the American Midwest.

Schaff returned to Germany ten years later to give lectures on his American experience. The result was the publication of *America*, a classic interpretation not simply of America, but quite specifically of the mission of German (particularly Reformed) theology in American church life.²⁸ His words have been quoted often.

Here now is the work of the German Church for America; not only of the Lutheran, but also of the German Reformed. . . . The German church, with its hearty enjoyment of Christianity, and direct intercourse with a personal Savior, its contemplative turn, its depth of inward view, its regard for history, and its spirited theology, might and should enter as a wholesome supplemental element into the development of American Protestantism.²⁹

Thus Schaff conceived German theology's nineteenth-century "errand" into the wilderness of American individualistic and subjectivistic religious life. He saw the special value in this of the "three most important and fundamental features of the Reformed type of Protestantism . . . absolute supremacy of the Holy Scriptures, absolute sovereignty of Divine grace, and radical moral reform on the basis of both."³⁰

Of special note is the fact that the work of Schaff and Nevin represents the cosmopolitan and international aspects of the Protestant theological enterprise, which had been more characteristic generally of the eighteenth century than of the nineteenth, when national and sectarian specifics were prominent. Theirs was not the only movement of this kind in America, of course, but "in its breadth of theological horizon and its degree of interrelationship, the work of Nevin and Schaff was unparalleled in America and hardly matched in England and Germany."³¹ While modern readers of *America* may discern in Schaff some of the same American chauvinism of Bushnell and others of the neo-Puritanism of the nineteenth century, the fusion of his German sense of historical development and his American sense of national destiny gave greater depth and profundity to America's growing national self-consciousness.

The third force converging in the Mercersburg Movement was the increasing German-American self-consciousness, which cherished the heritage from the fatherland but accepted responsibility for the newly adopted nation of so many thousands of German immigrants. This growing self-consciousness had negative and positive aspects. On the negative side were the tensions of cultural and

language differences. On the positive side was the maintenance of identity so essential to societal development. This can be traced, of course, in the other German background churches, where the influence was usually felt in the same way. In the German Reformed Church it was a significant factor in the more intensive period of denominational formation that accompanied the westward movement of the immigrants.

In concluding this section on the national phase of Reformed Church development, it is necessary, then, to identify and interpret the emerging German Reformed self-consciousness in the churches of the West and to show the relationship to the churches of the East.* Differences and tension were inevitable. At the same time the unifying influence of the *Heidelberg Catechism* shows repeatedly.

The organizational setting of the following interpretation requires attention first however. Between 1840 and 1870 large numbers of Germans moved into the Midwest, chiefly via the major waterways: the Great Lakes and the Ohio and the Mississippi rivers. A great many of these were newly arrived immigrants, but many were of the American-born generation of Germans from Pennsylvania, New York, and New Jersey. The latter group settled heavily in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Iowa; they were the English-speaking Germans. The newer, German-speaking groups were concentrated farther west in Wisconsin, Illinois, Iowa, and the Dakotas, many of them forming distinct communities of German Reformed people. The tensions between these two German Reformed groups determined much of the organizational expansion of the denomination through the remainder of the century and up to the post-World War I period.

Most noteworthy was the formation of so-called "German" synods. By holding to the German language, they felt some distance from the English-speaking church groups. In 1867, incidentally, the name German was dropped from the denominational title—a reflection of the stronger American spirit of the churches in the East. Ironically, eight years later the German Synod of the East was formed in the interest of those churches, largely of immigrant membership, who used the language. In 1867 the German Synod of the Northwest was formed at Fort Wayne, Indiana chiefly because the Ohio Synod (English-speaking) seemed not to understand the needs of the German Reformed settlements in Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Iowa. The dividing and re-forming of synods was for the most part a matter of difference over language. Such divisions in

*The liturgical controversy, which was an outgrowth of the Mercersburg Movement, is being passed over here, not because it is unimportant but because it did not in itself have a significant role in the subsequent development of the church among western immigrant churches. The liturgical controversy tore apart many of the churches and classes in the East. See David Dunn, et al., *A History of the Evangelical and Reformed Church* (Philadelphia: Christian Education Press, 1961), chapter 4.

many cases were not motivated by hostility; they were essentially a pragmatic solution to organizational problems.

Nevertheless, different theological accents prevailed as well. These were not as divisive as many have assumed. But they were significant in relation to the union developments of the twentieth century. Two distinctions must be kept in mind with respect to the synods west of Pittsburgh. First, the Ohio Synod tended to reflect the Americanizing that had been assailed in the Mercersburg Movement. As a result, newly arrived German immigrants were not comfortable there.³² Second, the new German immigrants exhibited the influence of the dominant church theology of nineteenth-century Germany, in which there was a resurgence of confessionalism in some sections. Reinhard Ulrich has argued the significance of the conflict between the churches in Ohio particularly, which were attuned to what he calls the "Old Reformed" party in the East and the confessionalism of the churches among the new immigrants. He has called attention, further, to the fact that the shaping influence of nineteenth-century German theology in the churches of the West gave them a common heritage with the Mercersburg Movement.³³

The new confessionalism was strongly oriented to the *Heidelberg Catechism*. Its institutional anchor and home for many decades was the Mission House, established by the Sheboygan Classis in 1862 in eastern Wisconsin.³⁴ That institution, modeled after similar institutions of Germany and Switzerland, later became a college and seminary. By supplying trained ministers for genuine mission efforts, the Mission House established the covenant theology of the *Heidelberg Catechism* in hundreds of churches. Although its *Heidelberg Catechism* covenant theology shared elements of a significant heritage with Mercersburg, it was distinguished from the latter by its appropriation of the older Reformed piety with its emphasis upon disciplined living as a sign of participation in the covenant and therefore the church. While this was hardly denied by the Mercersburg proponents, their emphasis was placed upon sacramental participation in the divine-human organism that is the church.

Extension of the Reformed Church among German immigrants in the upper Midwest throughout the last half of the nineteenth century testifies to the vitality of the churches for which the Mission House was the home base. As time went on, however, that vitality disappeared, largely as a result of the singular focus upon a mission to the German people. As German communities were steadily acclimated to American culture, the churches narrowed their concern to a defense of the Reformed faith; often that meant simply a defense of German language and culture.

By 1914 there were four German synods in the Reformed Church, all except one being located in the Midwest. Even as the last one was organized it was clear that there was no good reason for separate synodical organizations. Following World War I realignments took place which tended to eliminate such

lines. The German Reformed Church was increasingly an American church body, except in portions of the Synod of the Northwest, where ethnic self-consciousness was hardening as late as the 1920s.

In the meantime the denominational organization developing under the General Synod could scarcely be distinguished from that of any other American denomination.* Boards were established for missions, ministerial pensions, Christian education, and publication. Organizations for men and women were promoted—all parallel to other denominations. Of special historical interest was the formation in 1838 of the Board of Foreign Missions, which participated in the work of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, a nondenominational voluntary association that later became entirely Congregational. Those were the years when most missionary and humanitarian work was done by voluntary agencies, drawing from all denominations. But denominational development by the 1850s meant denominational mission boards. By 1866 the German Reformed Church had its own board program. Home missions were synodical efforts for many years until the General Synod, in 1886, established a board for this work. A special feature of this was work among Hungarian Reformed people, who were coming into the metropolitan areas of Cleveland, Chicago, and Pittsburgh. In 1921, after World War I had broken Hungarian ties with the homeland, about eighty congregations became organically related to the Reformed Church in the United States, being formed into four separate classes.³⁵

THE NATIONAL PHASE: EVANGELICAL

A significantly different facet of the German experience in American church life is shown in the establishment and development of what came to be known as the Evangelical Synod of North America.† This portion of the Evangelical and Reformed Church story covers a shorter span of time, but its beginning on the American scene in the second quarter of the nineteenth century provides another perspective on denominational formation among German immigrants. The differences between the Evangelical Synod experience and that of the Reformed Church discussed above lie both in the European roots of these groups and in the circumstances they faced on the Western frontier.

Carl E. Schneider, in the preface of his definitive history of the German experience on the frontier, writes:

*In parallel with other Protestant denominations during the nineteenth century, the Reformed Church established many educational institutions. By the time of its union with the Evangelical Synod three seminaries, seven colleges, and three academies were listed in its higher education roster.

†The European background of this movement of German people was discussed in chapter 5.

Conditions prevailing in both Germany and America at the time favored the rise of a Germanism which in the isolation of the Western frontier frequently sought to further its cause independent not only of American influences but also of contacts with the older German culture of the East. We are here dealing with the rise of a unique German civilization which, sometimes divided against itself, did not begin to integrate with American culture until the national crisis of the Civil War.^{36*}

The German Evangelical immigrants had no tradition of a colonial experience and no ties to any church body in the eastern part of the country. They were very much on their own in the frontier situation and thus dependent upon the culture and religious tradition of the fatherland. In the second decade many of the earlier settlers were of the peasant class, from Wuerttemberg. In succeeding decades people who were more educated and trained arrived from other parts of Germany. It is not surprising that German identity was critically important.

In the Protestant spectrum the immigrants of the period were chiefly Lutheran and Evangelical, with Reformed groups scattered among them. At the same time there was great diversity in religious understanding and loyalty as the result of the fragmented civil-political organization of Germany. Of particular interest for this chapter were the Evangelicals (known as the Evangelical Church), whose identity was drawn from the Church of the Prussian Union of 1817. They represented Lutheran and Reformed traditions in Germany, but even more the "unionistic" Protestantism that had emerged under the influence of Friedrich Schleiermacher and other religious leaders. These people found neither the Lutheran nor Reformed churches of America to their liking.

Without an established church organization and tradition in their new homeland, the German Evangelical settlers at first experienced what the German Reformed people had known a century earlier in the East—no pastoral leadership and no authority for church establishment. The forming of these Evangelicals into a church body that became a denomination resulted from three sets of circumstances.

First, was the inability of the established Reformed and Lutheran synods from the East to meet their needs and wants as a frontier people. The German consciousness of the immigrants reflected the vastly different cultural and religious situation of the fatherland in the nineteenth century, which made them seem utterly foreign to American-born Germans of the eastern synods. Even

*The point applies as well, of course, to the German Reformed people on the frontier with the qualification that they generally settled with an awareness of the presence of an already organized Reformed Synod in the nation. For those aware of that fact, the frontier experience was qualified by the colonial experience. In addition, many German Reformed people came with a profound commitment to the *Heidelberg Catechism*, which gave them a sense of identity even in frontier circumstances.

Samuel Schmucker's unionism in the Lutheran churches of Pennsylvania did not appeal to the Evangelicals who were unionists from Germany.

Second, a few German Evangelical churches were organized by devout laypeople, particularly schoolteachers. Some of these churches tended to remain independent, seeking no relationship with any synod. Occasionally also, a trained pastor who had emigrated with a group of settlers would take the initiative in establishing a church, as did Hermann Garlich at Femme Osage and St. Charles, Missouri.³⁷

Third and most important were the missionaries sent to America by the Basel and Barmen missionary societies specifically for work among German immigrants. One hundred fifty-eight of the Basel group served Evangelical churches. Many others worked among Reformed people and among the German immigrants who were gathered into the churches that eventually became part of the General Conference of German Congregational Churches. These missionary societies, with their training institutes at Basel and Barmen, were the fruit of the German Pietism that crossed Lutheran and Reformed confessional lines long before the union movement of the nineteenth century. Their role in the German churches on the American frontier was remarkable in every way. Because they represented the pietistic emphasis upon the experience of salvation rather than upon acceptance of a confession as the basis of church membership, they were especially effective in a situation where voluntary association was the model of church organization. Moreover, they identified readily with a people who were not antichurch nor antisacraments, but who were impatient with synodical ecclesiastical authoritarianism.

Basel missionaries, then, were most instrumental in the formation of Evangelical churches among German immigrants. A historic coincidence of singular importance in the affinity of the Evangelical people and the American Congregationalists is linked to the Basel missionaries. It was a group of Hartford, Connecticut laypeople—chiefly Congregationalists—who asked the Basel Missionary Society to send missionaries to serve among the German immigrants.³⁸ The first two sent were Joseph Rieger and George W. Wall, who, upon their arrival in America in May 1836, spent several months in Hartford and visited New York before going on to the West. Contacts were made then with the American Home Missionary Society and the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions that were to prove valuable for the future. Other missionaries followed, with the result that an ever-increasing number of Evangelical churches were founded.

Although Rieger and Wall were not the first Basel missionaries among the German Evangelical people, Friedrich Schmid having preceded them, they became key individuals in the organization of the churches into a cohesive group. Rieger was away on a European trip at the time, but he may be included

with Hermann Garlichs, George Wall, Louis Nollau, Philip Heyer, Johann Riess, and Karl Daubert as founders of the *Kirchenverein des Westens** in October 1840 at Gravois Settlement. Not desiring to establish a synod, these founders laid the basis for future synodical organization. Carl E. Schneider suggests that one reason for the decision to organize at this time was the increasing effort of the Lutheran synods and the Episcopal Church to draw the German Evangelicals into their organizations.³⁹ Further, divisions among the Lutherans and the animosity of the Saxon Lutherans to unionism had been a source of irritation to Evangelical people.

The nature of the *Kirchenverein* organization itself suggests the uncertainties and ambivalent feelings among the group about ecclesiastical structures. Typical of the pietist tradition, there was reluctance to establish constitutional ecclesiastical authority. The result was a kind of pastoral conference with only pastors holding full membership. Nevertheless, congregations were invited to send lay delegates, who could vote, with the number restricted to the number of clergy. Further evidence of pietist influence from the mother country may be seen in the concern to admit for ordination only those of acceptable character, with apparently no concern about a theological position or doctrinal loyalty.⁴⁰ No careful confessional statement was included; only reference to the symbolic writings of the "Evangelical mother church in Germany." Other concerns before the organizing group related to missionary intentions, religious education of the youth, a catechism, a book of worship, and clerical dress. In every respect the concerns of the group reflected the models of German rather than American church life. This supports Schneider's claim that the frontier favored the rise of Germanism among the immigrant groups.

Nothing reveals the tumultuous circumstances of church life on the frontier as much as the controversy over the *Kirchenverein*, which broke out shortly thereafter among the Germans in Missouri. Attacks of a public nature exhibited features of the frontier that are sometimes overlooked in modern attempts to glorify the virtues of independence, courage, and adventuresomeness. Most vicious were attacks from the self-styled rationalists, whose anticlerical and anticonfessional attitudes were much a part of nineteenth-century Germany. Their attitude was akin to the infidelity of American rationalists, which had been cause for concern in the churches in the East.

Lutheran resistance to the *Kirchenverein* grew from the ultraconservative Lutheran stance against unionism in the mother country. There was fear that an organized body of Evangelical churches would succeed in drawing Lutheran churches away from pure Lutheran doctrine. Again, the evidence supports the

*Officially *Der Deutsche Evangelische Kirchenverein des Westens* (The German Evangelical Church Society of the West).

thesis that the frontier circumstances tended to reproduce in America the nineteenth-century patterns of religious life in Germany.

It is important at this point in the discussion to outline the salient features of Evangelical theology as it is exhibited both in the emerging denominational structure and in the style of church life that prevailed. Observers generally have agreed that Lutheran traditions and theological temper are more easily identified than the Calvinist in the Evangelical churches.⁴¹ This was most pronounced in the order and organization of the life of the church, which, in the tradition of Luther's teaching and in marked contrast to Calvin, is of relatively little importance. Where Calvin saw the ordered life of the visible church as essential to the sustenance of faith and to the proclamation of the gospel through the example of a disciplined community of faith, Luther emphasized simply the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments as *constitutive* of the church. Consequently, the *essential* element of the church is the pastoral office. Luther "conceived the Church as a *Pastorenkirche*."⁴²

From the formation of the *Kirchenverein*, in which only pastors had full membership, to the development of the synodical structure, the central role of the pastor was clear among Evangelical people. The movement in this direction was less a matter of choice than of the unconscious assumptions brought from Germany. In most districts from which Evangelical people had come, the Lutheran pattern prevailed. Moreover, a residue of bitterness toward the bureaucratic and authoritarian consistories in Germany, which had their origin in the Reformed system, undoubtedly inclined Evangelical pastors and laity toward the *Pastorenkirche* model. The consequence was a form of church life that accentuated worship, the sacraments, Christian nurture, and voluntary organization for Christian service, in all of which the pastoral function was the key. In view of this it is not surprising that very early in the life of the *Kirchenverein*—1848—attention was given to establishing a seminary.

Theologically, *Kirchenverein* pastors were inclined toward the nonconfessional tradition in Germany, which had been nurtured by Pietism and strengthened by the formation of the Church of the Prussian Union. The heritage of Pietism, transmitted through the Basel and Barmen missionaries who comprised the majority of *Kirchenverein* pastors, provided the zeal for the gospel that invigorated the churches. Theophil W. Menzel characterized it as a "passionate concern for building, not a Lutheran or Reformed or Evangelical Zion, but a kingdom of God."⁴³

"Indifference to matters of doctrine" was certainly a characteristic of the *Kirchenverein* in its early years.⁴⁴ However, as was noted in chapter 5, religious conditions on the frontier led the pastors to recognize the necessity of some substantive expression of the faith within the tradition of the Reformation. By 1847 there was not only a statement of the confessional traditions to be used

within "the liberty of conscience prevailing in the Evangelical Church," but also a catechism for instruction in the faith.

The 1862 edition of the Evangelical Catechism, largely the product of Andreas Irion, represented a dogmatic trend in the *Kirchenverein* and later in the Synod, according to Carl Schneider.⁴⁵ Partly a result of narrowing denominational self-consciousness and partly a reflection of some trends in Germany—so often reflected among the German churches in America—the dogmatic tendency appeared from time to time and can be traced later in the history of the seminary. In general, however, the theological temper of the Evangelical Synod exhibited an American convergence of two theological trends. One has been cited earlier, in the discussion of the work of Philip Schaff, the Mercersburg theologian who saw creeds and confessions as part of the ongoing historical process of the church's use of revelation. Since "the actual church is a process, . . . always looking and pressing for completion," the theological task is unending yet must never allow itself to rest in what inevitably is the sectarian error of dogmatism.⁴⁶ The other trend was the focus upon the inward religious experience of the individual by the work of God in the Spirit. This combination gave rise to what became a familiar phrase in later church union efforts: "Creeds are testimonies, not tests, of the experience of faith."

Concern about substance of the faith expressed itself in another way. Its focus was provision for well-trained pastoral leadership. From the beginning days of the *Kirchenverein*, strong pastoral leadership showed its influence. To the initial group there were added a few years later several pastors who had been trained in some of the more prominent German universities. They brought to the Evangelical churches in America not only the best of nineteenth-century German Pietism but also an awareness of the importance of rigorous intellectual discipline for dealing with the issues of the time. From this came the early move to establish a seminary. In 1848, just eight years after the forming of the *Kirchenverein*, planning began. By 1850 the seminary, forerunner of the modern Eden Theological Seminary, opened at Marthasville, west of St. Louis. The names of Friedrich Birkner, William Binner, Andreas Irion, and Adolph Baltzer are firmly fixed in the solid foundations they gave to a seminary that later was to number among its graduates two of America's foremost theologians, Reinhold and Richard Niebuhr.

The synodical development of the *Kirchenverein* dates from 1866, when the name Synod was adopted at a General Conference of pastors and lay delegates. Thus, the German Evangelical Synod of the West moved these churches one more step along the road of American denominational development. The election of a full-time president was symbolic of the centralization of responsibility so characteristic of the Evangelical Synod all through its history. Along with the seminary, this office, filled first by Adolph Baltzer, became the primary

unifying force for the German Evangelical churches. Although there was some resistance years later to the full-time presidency, that did not last.

Much of the German Evangelical story tends to be focused in Missouri and southern Illinois because of the large concentration there. But in other parts of the country, groups of churches had grown in much the same way among the immigrants, having pastoral leadership from the same sources and sharing common patterns of religious life. These groups formed synods at about the same time. In 1872 the three synods came together: the Synod of the West (two and one half times larger than the other two put together), the Synod of the East (western New York and Ohio), and the Synod of the Northwest (Illinois, Michigan, and Indiana). Thus, the German Evangelical Synod of North America came into being. The word German was dropped in 1927, although the German language continued to be used widely for another generation.

In closing this discussion of the national phase of Evangelical Synod development, brief attention should be given to the unique fruits of the pietist heritage in this church body. Educational concerns on parish as well as synodical levels were always in the forefront. But equally important and perhaps most distinctive was the home mission enterprise. Extended in typical German fashion, this included not only a vigorous program of establishing new churches but also organized ways of meeting the special needs of the sick, the handicapped, the orphaned, and the disadvantaged. The number of hospitals, institutions, and other enterprises established by the churches of this Evangelical tradition proportionately exceeds that of most Protestant bodies.

THE UNION PHASE: EVANGELICAL AND REFORMED

Denominational patterns of church life for both the Evangelical Synod of North America and the Reformed Church in the United States toward the end of the national period followed those of other American denominations. There were few distinctions of any importance. As the twentieth century opened, a wave of ecumenical concern enveloped the major church bodies. The result was concentrated attention on questions of church union as practical ways of implementing the increasingly important vision of Christian unity. The discussion of this in chapter 5 is pertinent to the following paragraphs concerning the union of the Evangelical Synod and the Reformed Church.

Ecumenical commitment in both of these church bodies was high. In the Mercersburg Movement the Reformed Church had gained a profound theological vision of "evangelical catholicity and the catholic unity of the church."⁴⁷ The Evangelical Synod had received "the choice legacy of the *Kirchenverein*," which was "its zeal for church union."⁴⁸ Intensive involvement, then, in the church union efforts of the twentieth century was inevitable. While leaders in

both groups participated in ecumenical assemblies and conferences, official conversations and actions of significance did not begin until after World War I.

A Reformed "consensus" had been developing before the war, when *Articles of Agreement* were adopted by several bodies of that tradition, including the Reformed Church in the United States, in 1907 and 1908. At a Conference on Organic Union held after the war (1918), a *Plan of Federal Union* was proposed and was affirmed by the General Synod of the Reformed Church.⁴⁹ George W. Richards was the moving spirit behind this. In many ways he seemed to have inherited the mantle of Philip Schaff, who had done so much for a "Reformed consensus."

Similar concerns were being expressed in the general conferences of the Evangelical Synod, in 1925 and 1927. Here again, involvement in the great ecumenical assemblies of that era gave new vitality to long-held church union convictions. This was the case for Samuel Press, of the Evangelical Synod, as it was for George Richards, of the Reformed Church. Of equal importance was the strong response of the church bodies themselves. In 1925 the General Conference of the Evangelical Synod specifically instructed its officers to become active in "negotiations . . . looking toward organic union."⁵⁰

Three years later there was concrete expression of such concerns in a series of negotiations involving the Evangelical Synod and the Reformed Church with the United Brethren and, for a time, the Evangelical Church.* The latter group never involved itself seriously in the meetings of these churches. The consultations, which began in 1928, resulted in a three-way plan of union that included the United Brethren. The name proposed was "United Church in America." By 1930 the negotiations involved only the Reformed Church and the Evangelical Synod.

Two observations about the negotiations up to this point will throw some light upon what appeared to be a time of confusion but also of growing maturity in the church union enterprise. First, on the Reformed Church side there were repeated expressions of concern about doctrinal matters, especially relating to the difference between Reformed Church Calvinism and United Brethren Arminianism. Most striking, however, was the absence of substantive discussions about such matters.⁵¹ At the same time the Reformed Church rejected a Presbyterian overture lest it jeopardize the talks with the Evangelical Synod. Second, on the Evangelical Synod side there were informal contacts with the United Lutheran Church and the Moravians.⁵² These never moved beyond the informal stage. In both cases the movement of the Evangelical Synod and the

*The Evangelical Church here named represented the union in 1922 of the United Evangelical Church (German, but not related to the Evangelical Synod) and the Evangelical Association churches, which were an offspring of the work of Jacob Albright among the Germans in Pennsylvania in 1796, and were Methodist in polity.

Reformed Church toward each other by exclusion of other interested parties reflected a deepened recognition of the shared elements of their own traditions. That shared tradition was the European rather than the American form of Christian piety, which was more firmly imbedded in the historical continuity of Reformation thought. The possibility of the union of these two groups became a matter of commitment as a result of that maturing recognition of a common heritage.

Approval of a *Plan of Union* by the General Synod of the Reformed Church in 1932 was followed in 1933 by its ratification at the quadrennial General Convention of the Evangelical Synod. When the day of union arrived on June 26, 1934, the Evangelical and Reformed Church was born. A scant six years had passed since the initial conversations, but the hope that such a union would take place had been expressed eighty years earlier by Philip Schaff.* Commentators of that time called attention to the most noteworthy feature of the act of union—the agreement to unite and then to create the constitutional and organizational arrangements for implementation. Samuel McCrea Cavert, of the Federal Council of Churches, said: "Your decision to *unite* and to trust to the future for the working out of the implications of the union sets a new precedent in the history of American churches."⁵³ The public commitment of these two church bodies to a life together in trust and in obedience to Christ led them on a journey of exploration in the difficult terrain of the institutional organization of the church. Another six years were required to design a constitution and organization consonant with the traditions represented but also adequate for the times. In the interim the two church bodies maintained their individual legal structures but at the same time proceeded to consolidation on all levels of denominational life.

With the adoption of a constitution in 1938 and its implementation in 1940, the Evangelical and Reformed Church entered the mainstream of American church life. At that point its total confirmed membership numbered 655,366, a small denomination by American standards but prepared to grow in the following decades at a comparable rate with other church bodies. The constitution represented a blend of polities rooted in the histories of the two churches. Ideally, this blend was designed to maintain a lively tension between *autonomy* and *authority*, a tension that is of the very essence of the Reformed ecclesiological tradition. George W. Richards characterized the Evangelical and Reformed polity as "essentially presbyterial," that is, a government by judicatories, with its

*George W. Richards asserted that in 1854 Schaff entered into correspondence with Prof. William Binner, of the seminary of the *Kirchenverein*, then located at Marthasville, Missouri. From that correspondence the conviction grew in Schaff's mind that these two German church bodies should unite. He urged his Mercersburg colleagues to work toward that. Cf. George W. Richards Collection, Archives, Lancaster Theological Seminary.

"fontal source of authority in the congregation acting through representatives in the congregational and the denominational judicatories."⁵⁴

In the same connection Richards acknowledged that the presbyterial character of the new denominational organization was a concession made to the Reformed Church by the Evangelical Synod. That Synod was organized in the Congregationalist model of most Lutheran bodies in America. Perhaps the sharpest contrast between the Reformed and the Evangelical polities can be expressed by saying that in the former the connectionalism of the denomination lay in the office and role of the elder, whereas in the latter it lay in the office of the pastor. The provision for a system of judicatories—consistory (or church council), synod, and General Synod—introduced an explicit line of authority reaching from the General Synod to the local church through the latter's consistory. Moreover, it was a line of authority that balanced the roles of clergy and laity.

In the six years' work of building a denominational structure, the two groups made concessions to one another out of a spirit of growing trust based on commitment to the lordship of Christ. The concession Richards referred to, in the previous paragraph, was one. In a revealing letter, Louis W. Goebel, vice-president of the Evangelical Synod, wrote to C.W. Locher, Synod president, indicating a concession on the part of the Reformed Church to the Evangelical Synod:

I had a perfectly splendid time at Akron [site of the 1932 Reformed General Synod]. These good folk are so much like our own church that one feels perfectly at home with them. . . . The Evangelical Synod cannot fail to ratify this union if it wishes to remain true to its cardinal principles. *The agreement on the point of doctrine is certainly a concession on the part of the Reformed Church and amounts in fact to an acceptance of our position.*⁵⁵

Both concessions reflected fundamental characteristics of the two churches. Carl E. Schneider, noting the "spirit of Luther" in the Evangelical Synod and the Calvinistic heritage of the Reformed Church, argued that such apparent diversity was not a hindrance to union.

The vital significance of this union, however, is not to be found in the doctrinal and ecclesiastical *rapprochement* of two antithetical bodies, but in the mutual appropriation of the religious values common to both. That the Evangelical Synod was . . . rooted in the . . . German Reformation has never been seriously questioned. It has not always been equally clear that the Reformed Church was congenial to the spiritual and religious message of the German movement. If, therefore, it can be shown that the genius of the Reformed Church . . . lies not in its Calvinistic predilections but in its vital committal to the liberal heritage of German Protestantism, then it may become . . . clear that the union with the Evangelical Synod was consummated on a functional rather than an ecclesiastical basis.⁵⁶

The cogency of Schneider's point cannot be denied. The liberal* heritage of German Protestantism, particularly of the nineteenth-century variety, influenced both churches. Philip Schaff has already been identified as the most influential transmitter of that heritage from Germany to the Reformed Church and indirectly as a confirmer of it in the Evangelical Synod.

Nevertheless, the observation must be qualified by calling attention to elements of the Calvinistic heritage that can be identified not only in the Reformed Church before the union but also in the Evangelical and Reformed Church constitution. Two may be cited: the doctrine of the church as the reality of the kingdom of grace and the place of order and discipline in the church as witness to God's reign in the world. Both have their ground in the *Heidelberg Catechism*, which was one of the three confessional documents upon which the Evangelical and Reformed Church based its faith stance.

While there is widespread agreement that the *Heidelberg Catechism* was an effectual bridge between Calvinist and Lutheran traditions, it should be remembered that this refers more to its functional and devotional style than to its content. "It emphasized not the Calvinistic-theological but the Lutheran-experiential approach to religion."⁵⁷ At the same time its theological conceptual framework utilizes Calvin's understanding of the church in relation to the doctrine of election.⁵⁸ Bard Thompson, in discussing the question of assurance of election, makes the point that such assurance does not come by "some extraordinary perception into the hidden decrees of God, . . . [but] by what Calvin designates 'our inward calling,' namely our conscious awareness that the Word of God has come alive in our hearts through the action of the Holy Spirit and that we do indeed belong to Christ through faith."⁵⁹ That sense of inward calling is the work of the Word and the Spirit in the church, the called community, and results in the Christian's affirmation of God's election:

I believe that, from the beginning to the end of the world, and from among the whole human race, the Son of God, by his Spirit and his Word, gathers, protects, and preserves for himself, in the unity of the true faith, a congregation chosen for eternal life. Moreover, I believe that I am and forever will remain a living member of it.⁶⁰

The church, then, is the visible reality of the kingdom of grace, in which the Christian experiences both calling and assurance. As such, the church's form in the world is not a matter of indifference; its form must express the reality of the Christian's calling and assurance. In the Calvinist Reformed tradition that requires the ordered ministry of Word and Sacrament and the disciplined life of the believer. In the Evangelical and Reformed Church this tradition was incor-

*The word liberal as Schneider used it must be understood in its nineteenth-century German setting not in the twentieth-century American setting. It was characterized by an interconfessional, unionistic stance in all forms of church life.

porated in the office of elder and in the judicatories from the congregation on up to the General Synod, as provided in the constitution. The constitution began with words expressing a principle dear to the hearts of Reformed people: "For the maintenance of *truth* and *order* . . . the Evangelical and Reformed Church . . . ordains this constitution to be its fundamental law and declares the same to have authority over all its ministers, members, congregations and judicatories."

Although well expressed in constitutional form, it is clear from the experience of the succeeding years that this understanding of the church was acknowledged more in letter than in practice. The implicit expectations of discipline, whether in the local church or the synod, were rarely met. The proper use of the judicatory system fell by the wayside. Although many reasons may be cited, it is certainly true that the times were calling for a different form of church order and organization. The constitution had been prepared with much regard for the founding traditions; it did not reflect awareness of the changes taking place in American religious life. The implications of the long-developing accent upon the centrality of the faith experience in the formation of the church in American life was not given recognition in the constitution. At the same time the religious practice of both churches had reflected this for a long time in varying degrees. That is why George W. Richards could write, in 1942, about the spirit of the Evangelical and Reformed Church:

The article of the standing and falling Church is the experience contained in the confession: "I believe that Jesus Christ is my Saviour and Lord." When men have that conviction in the heart and make confession with the mouth, they have passed from the bondage of ordinances and the rudiments of the world into the liberty of the sons of God. *They are then free to work out statements of doctrine, forms of worship, and ways of life which are true to their experience, to the spirit of the glorified Christ, and to the conditions of the age in which they live.*⁶¹

The Evangelical and Reformed venture in the development of the institutional form of the church marked another step in the German experience in American church life. It was a significant transitional step in that it was a recognition of the limits of an ethnic tradition in church formation, but even more so in the recognition that through that tradition there were expressions of the Protestant faith to be preserved and conveyed to future generations. That is what lay behind the commitment to the cause of Christian unity through church union. It was a response of obedient faith, marked by the willingness to risk cherished forms and practices. It represented acknowledgment of the lordship of Jesus Christ in the church and in the world.

As a singular denominational body the Evangelical and Reformed Church had a short life of only twenty-three years. Its contributions to American Christianity are, therefore, difficult to assess. In the union negotiations both churches

displayed some self-consciousness about the contributions of their respective heritages. For the Evangelical Synod this meant a concern to extend the inter-confessional, unionistic, and liberal evangelical stance, which it had developed from its German roots, into the mainstream of Protestant life. For the Reformed Church it meant an opportunity to extend the witness of its Calvinist heritage, as expressed in its order of church life and passion for evangelical catholicity, in a new organizational form.

The concessions noted earlier resulted in some ambiguities. However, in the process of developing the constitution, the fundamental affinities of the two groups tended either to overcome or brush aside such ambiguities in a spirit of commitment to unity. The words of Richards quoted above exhibit this; but in another connection even more, when he said: "Without the Christlike spirit no constitution will ever be effective; *with that spirit one will need only a minimum of law for the administration of the affairs of the fellowship of men and women.*"⁶² This last quotation is in many respects a singular example of the flowing together of the spirit of both Calvin and Luther in a man who, in his lifetime, was a foremost ecumenical leader. In the first half of the quotation, Calvin's passion for the rule of Christ shines through; in the last half, Luther's diffidence toward administration in the church is accentuated.

That spirit seemed to be characteristic of the new denomination as it found itself needing to be responsive to the needs of the world as it moved into times of catastrophic war and social change. The three presidents who served during those years—George W. Richards, Louis W. Goebel, and James E. Wagner—represented styles of leadership sensitive both to the traditions and to the times. It was characteristic of James E. Wagner to say: "The new church, to justify its validity as a church of the Reformation tradition, had to demonstrate that it was not only a Reformed but also a reforming church, responding to the ever-changing needs of man and to the never-changing imperatives of the church's Lord."⁶³

Perhaps the essential character of the Evangelical and Reformed Church lay in its commitment to "the liberty of conscience inherent in the Gospel" and in its passion to respond to the mandate for unity. That character meant the eventual surrender of its own life for the sake of the formation of the United Church of Christ.