

## Chapter 3

# THE URSINUS SCHOOL

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DURING THE COURSE of development of the United Church of Christ a number of splinter groups and subgroups came into being as a result of various conflicts. Race and immigration have shaped the denomination over and over.

In the mid-nineteenth century, however, there was a theological and liturgical controversy within Pennsylvania Reformed history that rocked the entire church. A college and a seminary were founded to promote a theological point of view in opposition to the much-celebrated Mercersburg perspective. The new viewpoint was called the Ursinus School, or Ursinus Movement, not because it related to the work of Zacharias Ursinus, author of the Heidelberg Catechism, but because it was centered around a school located in southeastern Pennsylvania named Ursinus. At the heart of the struggle were two strong personalities: John H. A. Bomberger and James I. Good.

The story begins when Philip Schaff, a German historian on the faculty of the seminary at Mercersburg, delivered his famous address on "The Principles of Protestantism," in First Church, Reading, Pennsylvania, on October 24, 1844. The address "stood against the inadequacies of American Christianity: its unhistorical character, its provincialism, its subjectivism and sectarianism."<sup>(1)</sup> Soon after Joseph Berg, pastor of the German Reformed Church (Race Street), Philadelphia, and others attacked the person and theology of young Schaff and accused him of heresy and attempting to romanize the Reformed Church. Schaff spoke of the continuity of the church, its evangelical and apostolic nature, and lifted up the importance of the incarnate Word—Jesus Christ. The attack resulted in Schaff 's being tried for heresy. Those who sat in judgment — one of whom was Bomberger — supported Schaff, and he was cleared of the charge.

## PULPIT VERSUS ALTAR

What were the marks of the Ursinus movement at its inception? James I. Good, chief historian of the Ursinus position, summarized them in the April 24, 1861 issue of the Reformed Church's Messenger as opposition to the use of congregational responses, the inclusion of a priestly absolution of sin, and the incorporation of spiritual regeneration at baptism in the liturgy presented to General Synod in 1859 and 1860.

These differences in liturgical desires became strong convictions that were described in terms of

pulpit liturgy and altar liturgy. The Ursinus movement emphasized the pulpit liturgy, which omitted responses and prayers spoken by the people and consisted principally of forms for special services and rites, such as the Lord's Supper and baptism. This liturgy was centered in the pulpit and in preaching that may have been expository and to a large extent hortatory. It focused on the human interpretation of the word and an exhortation to moral living in obedience to the word.

The Mercersburg movement celebrated the altar liturgy, in which the pastor and people joined together in response to God. This liturgy was centered in the mighty acts of God through the grace of Christ and Christ's spiritual presence. The sermon was a proclamation of what God had done in Christ as symbolized by the altar and pulpit. The obedient acts of the people were understood to be offerings of thanksgiving and praise, spiritual sacrifices offered gratefully because of what God in Christ had done for them.

The difference between the two views came to a climax in January of 1862, when the liturgical committee of the church divided six to one in favor of the altar liturgy, Bomberger representing the one opposing vote. All had agreed previously that revision of the provisional liturgy was necessary, but Bomberger, under the influence of Berg and other low-church pastors in the Philadelphia Classis, changed his liturgical position.(2) From this point on he became the symbol of the free church, or low-church movement.

John Nevin, also a professor at Mercersburg, Schaff, and Bomberger referred to the same European Reformers and liturgies but produced different interpretations. In assessing the controversy The Messenger's editor wrote on May 22, 1861: "The controversy about the liturgy in the Messenger must be closed because of its danger of climbing into huge proportions and because it has run into personalities."(3)

## **CONTROVERSY SPREADS**

The controversy spread westward. The Rex. Max Stern attacked the liturgy in the western German church paper, The Evangelist, on January 23, 1861. The free church tradition represented by Stern was not of recent vintage. When, in 1838, the Ohio Synod inaugurated J. G. Buettner as seminary professor, one of Buettner's reasons for accepting the position was to train pastors to oppose revivalism. But many Ohio ministers favored revivalism, and the seminary soon faded for want of students. The conflict over new measures and revivalism continued during the 1840s, and the development of a theological seminary was delayed until 1847, when the synod voted to raise money for an institution. In 1849 Jeremiah H. Good became professor of theology at the Ohio Literary and Theological Institution. After an unsettled period the theological institution became part of Heidelberg College, which opened its doors at Tiffin, Ohio, on November 18, 1850, with E. V. Gerhart as president and professor of theology. J. H. Good was professor of mathematics, and Reuben Good, rector of the academy. Later Gerhart moved to Lancaster Seminary, and the Goods became prime movers in the low-church, or Old Reformed, movement.(4)

In Pennsylvania the debate over the liturgy continued at each meeting of the Eastern Synod. The leaders of the debate were members of the liturgical committee. Schaff and Nevin were the principals on the so-called high-church side. They were soon joined by such eminent pastors as Henry Harbaugh, S. R. Fisher, and Daniel Ganz. Supporting Bomberger were George W. Willard, Joseph Berg, and James I. Good. The positions hardened into two movements, with delegate elders and congregations taking sides.

Although the principals conducted the debate on a scholarly level and referred back to German and Swiss sources, some antiliturgical supporters got their ammunition for the struggle from the revivalism of the Great Awakening. The revivalistic trend increased in Pennsylvania. The new measures movement included, in addition to daily Bible reading and prayer, prohibitions against smoking, drinking, swearing, and associating with those who do. The impact of revivalism had reached the congregation in Mercersburg, and it was this fact that originally started Nevin on his writing career with the publication of *The Anxious Bench*, a polemic, or tract, against revivalism and its new measures.

## **URSINUS FOUNDED**

The high-church movement was headquartered in the seminary at Mercersburg. The low-church movement had no headquarters. It became evident that if Bomberger and his supporters were to maintain their strength, they too needed an administrative center and a training school for leaders. The only other seminary was in Ohio, but that was too far away and was also caught up in the struggle between high-church and low-church factions.

The Philadelphia Classis, in which pastors Bomberger and Berg served, became the focal judicatory within Eastern Synod for the founding of a headquarters. If the antiliturgical movement was to succeed, pastors needed to be educated. Individual support also came from pastors in other Classes, for the liturgical question had been referred from the Eastern Synod to constituent Classes. Several locations for a college were considered, but the villages of Freeland and Trappe, in Montgomery County, near Philadelphia, proved a logical setting. Here were the Washington Hall in Trappe, conducted by Abel Rambo; Freeland Seminary, conducted by Adam H. Fetterolf; and the Pennsylvania Female College at Freeland, headed by J. Warren Sunderland. Nearby, in Norristown, was the Elmwood Institute, conducted by John R. Kooker, a former pastor at St. Luke's Church, Trappe, and then pastor of the Reformed Church of the Ascension. All these institutions were small and struggling. The buildings for Freeland Seminary and the Pennsylvania Female College were built by Abraham Hunsicker, a Mennonite minister who conducted worship in Freeland. The congregation served by him later became Trinity Reformed Church, Collegeville.

Under the leadership of Bomberger the ways and means committee of the Philadelphia Classis raised more than \$25,000 for the establishment of a college. The buildings in Freeland were purchased in January 1869 for \$20,000; the organization of a college began in February. On June 7 of that year Bomberger was elected president of the college. His election as pastor of St.

Luke's Church, Trappe, provided the security necessary to accept the presidency of the college, which at its inception faced uncertainties of developing a faculty, a student body, and a sound financial base.(5)

The Heidelberg Catechism and the Palatinate Liturgy served as takeoffs for Bomberger's theological and liturgical positions. Out of this context he chose the name of the eminent author of these documents — Zacharias Ursinus — to be the name of the college. Thus the headquarters for the Old Reformed party had an appealing, symbolic name. Bomberger suggested the design for the corporate seal and participated in writing the movement's constitution.

The college was planned as a four-year baccalaureate institution, but Bomberger and the Classis had in mind the preparation of students for the ministry. On receiving the first students, in September 1870, the announcement indicated that theology would be offered in the curriculum. The Philadelphia Classis gave approval to the purpose, and Bomberger, with James I. Good, developed a theological faculty that included John Van Haagan, H. W. Super, A. S. Zerbe, John H. Sechler, Philip Vollmer, George Stibbitz, George W. Willard, and William J. Hinke.

On Bomberger's death, in 1890, James I. Good succeeded in the leadership of the theological school and as the head of the Old Reformed movement. Good sought to widen the sphere of influence of the Ursinus School. After moving to Philadelphia, Edward S. Bromer was added to the faculty. Good made numerous trips to Germany, Switzerland, and Hungary to study the Reformed history and to recruit students. Even though enrollment figures remained low, the school provided excellent preparation for the pastoral ministry.

The School of Theology continued at Ursinus College until 1898, when it was moved to 33d and Chestnut Streets in Philadelphia. The relocation was prompted by a desire to be close to the campus of the University of Pennsylvania, which had no theological school.

## **THE "URSINUS SCHOOL"**

At the same time that Bomberger was developing educational institutions to reach the minds of youth, he was calculating how he could adequately respond to the high-church articles in *The Messenger*. In 1868 he launched the *Reformed Church Monthly*, in which he and his followers answered and challenged his liturgical opponents.

As the leader of the low-church movement, Bomberger desired a theological base for the doctrine of the church, the ministry, and the sacraments. He did not succumb to revivalism and the new measures. The term low church was not to his liking, and he referred to the emphasis of the antiliturgical group as the Old Reformed, preferring not to be thought of as antiliturgical. Bomberger sought revision of the provisional liturgy to allow free prayer, rather than liturgical prayers and responses, to remove the absolution after confession of sin and to give prime importance to preaching so that, practically speaking, it preempted at least fifty percent of the Sunday morning service. His liturgy, as a pulpit liturgy, put the pastor in the position of the chief

speaker. The members' participation was reduced to singing hymns and praying the Lord's Prayer.

The controversy increased in intensity for ten years, from 1861 to 1871. Bomberger's opponents accused him of becoming an antagonist because he was not given proper recognition and because he was not called to the professorship at Mercersburg after Harbaugh's death. Bomberger refuted these accusations and said that although it was true he was a member of the original liturgical committee of General Synod and favored the liturgy, he reversed his position on the basis of principle in 1860—61.(6)

Debate became personal between men on both sides of the question. It seems appropriate to cite the fact that Nevin was of Scotch-Irish descent and Bomberger, of German descent, two ethnic strains known for their stubbornness. Behind the principle was plain stubbornness.

The "Ursinus School" became a term that symbolized the Old Reformed movement. At times the term free worship was used, as over against the Mercersburg School and liturgical worship. Some have incorrectly used the label free church movement; this it never was. There was no movement toward sectarianism or separatism. The Ursinus School remained within the Classis, Synod, and General Synod structure, which was presbyterial in order. Although conflict was present, so also was respect for church order, and the debates occurred on the floor of the judicatory meetings.

The Philadelphia Classis generally supported the initiation of theological education at Ursinus College. The Rev. S. R. Fisher contested the work of Bomberger as being unconstitutional on the basis that a theological professor was to be elected by the General Synod. Bomberger cited the precedent of pastors privately teaching theology and preparing students for the ministry and further insisted that there is no difference between theological professor and minister. Every minister is a theological teacher. The Mercersburg view was that whereas every pastor teaches theology, not every pastor is called to be a professor of theology, and that by the constitution the church elects the theological professor. The controversy reached the floor of the General Synod of 1872, at Cincinnati, Ohio.

The church was becoming weary of the controversy, and because theology was already being taught at Ursinus, it was probably expedient for the Synod to vote in favor of Bomberger. Although it was true that on the frontier theology had been taught in parsonages, the church was now maturing and seeking to bring order to theological education as well as to other areas of work. A theological/liturgical controversy at such a time made the maturing process more complex.

The high-water mark of the Ursinus School was reached in 1878. The Goods, one in Collegeville and one in Tiffin, were links in the chain of alliance between Pennsylvania and the Middle West. It was advantageous for the Ursinus School, the Pietists, and the revivalists to join forces to stop the advance of the Mercersburg leaders. The strength of Mercersburg increased to the point where the placement of pastors became a political issue. The Old Reformed accused the

Mercersburg proponents of appointing committees for the call of pastors without the consistories' consent. Benevolent assessments on the congregations were refused because of their being used to send students to liturgically oriented seminaries.

When the General Synod convened in Lancaster in 1878 the election of the president showed the strength of the two parties. The first ballot ended in a tie between representatives of the liturgical and nonliturgical groups. On the second ballot David Van Horne, a low-church advocater, was elected. Clement Z. Weiser proposed a peace commission to seek a compromise and heal the long-standing division. The proposal was adopted. Then began the work that eventually brought a compromise, if not a complete ending, to the controversy.(7) The degree of animosity that existed can be seen in the fact that immediately after the election of Van Horne as president, the large cross atop the altar was removed until the Synod was completed. At this same Synod, for the first time and under the influence of the revivalists, a prayer meeting was held.(8)

The peace commission was composed of an equal number of pastors and elders from both sides of the controversy. A revision of the 1866 liturgy took place, with the resultant work being called a Directory of Worship. It was agreed that the use of the Directory would be with the action of each consistory. The Directory actually had limited usage. Mercersburg congregations continued to use the 1866 liturgy, and Ursinus congregations used no liturgy except for the Holy Communion. The Directory was in reality a flag of truce.

## **THEOLOGICAL LEGACY**

The doctrinal differences between the two movements were substantive and pronounced. Both groups referred to the same Heidelberg sources and produced different interpretations. The chief difference lay in the concept of the church. Bomberger and Good were Reformists. Their ecclesiology stopped with Zwingli, Calvin, and the Heidelberg Catechism. Thus they liked the term Old Reformed. They had difficulty accepting the fact that Ursinus was strongly influenced by Philip Melanchthon when he wrote the catechism. Through Melanchthon there was an underlying catholic spirit that made the catechism irenic and a bridging document.

Schaff and Nevin emphasized the continuity of the church through the Reformation and the Roman church (with its errors) back to the apostolic church. More than a century ago Schaff used the descriptive words reformed, evangelical, and catholic. The peace commission produced a statement that brought a truce in the doctrinal field.

We do not regard the visible church as commensurate and identical with the invisible church (according to the Roman theory) nor do we think that in this world the invisible church can be separated from the visible (according to the theory of Pietism and false spiritualism); but while we do not identify them, we do not in our views separate them.(9)

## **ARCHITECTURAL LEGACY**

Evidences of the Ursinus School were seen in many churches during the latter half of the nineteenth century, in the architectural designs as well as in the chancel appointments. In fact, the word chancel would not have been used, because this was a high-church term used to describe the area behind the rail that separated the table and the pulpit from the rest of the church.

The low-church people simply referred to the area as “the front of the church.” As recently as a generation ago uninformed members colloquially said “on the pulpit” when they referred to the entire area behind the rail.

The communion table usually stood one step above the main floor. It was unadorned except for a homemade runner. The colors of the church year were not acknowledged. On most Sundays the only items permitted on the table were the offering plates. As recently as the late 1950s some tables did not have crosses, because this custom was considered too Roman. Of course, no candlesticks were on the table. Lights, frequently ornate, adorned the pulpit for the practical reason to illuminate for reading.

In churches erected in the latter portion of the 1800s the pulpit was placed on a platform two or three steps above the floor of the table and was centered behind it. The pulpit was generally larger than the table and more ornate. Some tables were enclosed pieces of furniture resembling small, boxlike altars but they were still called tables. Other tables, when pulled away from the pulpit platform, revealed cupboards that could be used to store the communion service.

Worship was usually conducted from the pulpit. The Lord’s Supper was often the only occasion when the pastor approached the table and that was for the distribution of the bread and wine. Turning to face the communion table during the prayer, with one’s back to the people, was unacceptable. One had to pray from the pulpit. As recently as the 1940s some congregations did not look favorably on the pastor wearing the black Geneva pulpit gown.

The architectural style of the churches built in the eighteenth century presented some problems but were generally acceptable to the Ursinus School. This style, which reflected earlier German architecture, placed a four-to-five-foot-long table below the pulpit. In some churches the table stood free from the pulpit, with the benches facing in from three sides. With a balcony on three sides, the pulpit was conveniently elevated five to eight steps above the floor level of the table. A painting of Christ usually hung on the wall behind the pulpit. Because of the size, position, and respect given the table in relation to the pulpit this eighteenth-century style, remarkably enough, emphasized both the word and the sacrament. Yet it was also acceptable to the Old Reformed element, with the exception of the use of pictures or paintings.

## **ORGANIZATIONAL LEGACY**

Another area of struggle was centered in the writing of a constitution and bylaws that could embody in church structure an ecclesiology and doctrine with which both sides could live. This was finally accomplished in 1908.

The Ursinus School of Theology in Philadelphia did not develop sufficiently to maintain a separate existence. A friendly invitation was extended by Lancaster Theological Seminary for consolidation. Conversations were held with the theological seminary related to Heidelberg College at Tiffin, Ohio, because of the greater affinity for the low-church position. In 1907 the union of the two schools was consummated under the new name of Central Theological Seminary, and the new site was Dayton, Ohio. Shortly after the formation of the Evangelical and Reformed Church, in 1934, Central Theological Seminary united with Eden Theological Seminary in Webster Groves, Missouri.

During the transitional periods some Ursinus faculty members transferred to other institutions: Edwin S. Bromer went to Lancaster Theological Seminary; William J. Hinke went to Auburn Theological Seminary; James I. Good, Philip Vollmer, and George Stibbitz went to Central Theological Seminary.

## **IMPACT TODAY**

Today if one were to visit congregations that were once related to the Ursinus School, one would find altars against the wall or large tables standing free, with a pulpit and a lectern on either side. Every congregation now has a cross on the table, fastened to the wall behind the altar or suspended above it. Most also have candles on the altar/table and an acolyte seated in the chancel. This practice is no longer seen as a romanizing tendency.

St. Luke's Church, Trappe, where Bomberger served, now uses the Evangelical and Reformed liturgy, which is the successor to the 1866 liturgy, and at times uses the United Church of Christ Service of Word and Sacrament. The altar at St. Luke's is against the wall, beneath a reredos that bears a cross-shaped design. Candlesticks, flowers, and liturgical colors are used regularly. At Trinity Church, Colledgeville, which is surrounded by the Ursinus College campus, the chancel was recently renovated to have a large, free standing table with a pulpit to the side and a cross mounted on the wall above the table. Older members of the church remember the tradition, and the confession and assurance of pardon are seldom used. However, responsive readings, litanies, a profession of faith, and the Gloria Patri are a regular part of worship.

Each group established a summer conference for ministers and members — one at Ursinus College and one at Franklin and Marshall Academy, in Lancaster. For a time the Lancaster Conference moved to Cedar Crest College but now continues as the Spiritual Conference at Franklin and Marshall College. The Colledgeville Summer Assembly has ceased to function and has given its endowment to Ursinus College, with the income to be used for an ecumenical day of theological education at the college.

The interludes of history bring messages in themselves. In this sense it is interesting to note that in the past fifty years Ursinus College has twice called an Episcopalian as its president.

Another mark of change in the hidden history of the Ursinus School is the graduation from the college in the 1930s of three students — Morris D. Slifer, Scott F. Brenner, and Paul E. Schmoyer — who became leaders in the twentieth-century liturgical movement. All three served on committees for the revision of the Evangelical and Reformed Book of Worship, which is the successor liturgy to the classic Mercersburg Liturgy of 1866, or have written books dealing with the liturgy.

As one looks back over that critical period in the history of the Reformed Church one can only conjecture what would have happened if Bomberger had been called to the seminary professorship rather than Henry Harbaugh. James I. Good insisted that the reasons for the controversy were not personal. Certainly, the determination to find peace rather than schism indicates that each side believed it could find some common rock on which it could stand. Even though the reasons for the controversy may not have been personal, the antagonists were persons. Some of the German ethos, which had for so many centuries preserved small principalities and states in Germany, was operating here. One has to say that without the stubbornness of the German and Scotch-Irish participants, peace would have come sooner.

Nevertheless, the controversy did not keep the church from growing in Pennsylvania, where in 1957, when the union with the Congregational Christian Churches was consummated, there were nine hundred congregations. A more serious problem for church growth was the reluctance to surrender the German language and minister to the English-speaking people in Pennsylvania and in areas of the United States open to mission.

What are the continuing benefits of the Ursinus School? The most lasting and the one that has continued strongly to affect the lives of people and the nation is the founding of the college. Others are the education of generations of pastors, the upholding of a basic piety (over against Pietism) as an essential expression of faith, an abiding interest in theology, and a continuing witness to the confessional nature of the church. The Ursinus movement and the Mercersburg movement inherited a basic loyalty to the church and its head, Jesus Christ, which is a benefit and a heritage to receive and pass on to future generations.

## NOTES

1. Bard Thompson and George H. Bricker, eds., *Philip Schaff: The Principle of Protestantism* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1964), p. 14.
2. James I. Good, *History of the Reformed Church in the U. S. in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Board of Publication of the Reformed Church in America, 1911), p. 394.

3. Ibid., p. 382.
4. Ibid., pp. 120-23.
5. Charles E. Schaeffer, *History of the Classis of Philadelphia of the Reformed Church in the United States* (Classis of Philadelphia, 1944), p. 96.
6. Good, op. cit., p. 532.
7. H. M. J. Klein, *The History of the Eastern Synod of the Reformed Church in the United States* (Eastern Synod, 1943), pp. 266-69.
8. Good, op. cit., p. 579.
9. Ibid., p. 582.