

A BIOGRAPHY OF ADOLPH HOENECKE WITH SPECIAL EMPHASIS ON THE ROLE HE PLAYED  
IN SHAPING THE CONSERVATIVE POSITION OF OUR SYNOD

By Harold Wicke

A SHORT SKETCH OF HIS LIFE

Adolph Hoenecke, the son of William Hoenecke and his wife Amalie, nee Liebchen, was born on the 25th of February, 1835, in Brandenburg, Germany, a town about 50 to 60 miles south-west of Berlin. His father was an inspector of hospitals by profession, and was a man who was much interested in giving his children a good education. He sent all of his sons through the Gymnasium at Brandenburg, after which Hoenecke's older brothers entered the armed forces. A word ought to be said about the religious atmosphere of the home. Hoenecke was born in the hey-day of rationalism. His father was an unbeliever, and not even outwardly interested in matters pertaining to the church, nor in the least concerned about the religious upbringing of his sons. His mother is said to have believed personally, to have taught her sons prayers in their youth, but to have been completely without influence in their later religious training.

When Hoenecke finished his education at the Gymnasium of Brandenburg, he was unable to follow in the footsteps of his older brothers, who had entered the army, due to his weak physical condition. For a time he toyed with the idea of becoming a flower-gardener, because he dearly loved flowers, a love he kept to his old age. But a chance remark, of which we shall have something to say later, led him to decide to enter the ministry. In 1856, at the age of 21 years, he accordingly entered the University of Halle to study theology. In Halle he came under the influence of August Tholuck, who won him for the Gospel of Christ, and by his teaching and through personal contact firmly established him in the truths of the Word of God. In 1859, at the age of 24, Hoenecke passed his examination and graduated from the university.

Tholuck wanted Hoenecke to continue his schooling in order to become a professor of theology, but Hoenecke did not have sufficient funds to do so. Nor was he able to enter into the ministry, because there was a great overproduction of theological candidates. Many had to wait seven or eight years before being assigned a parish. It was Tholuck, who then procured a position for young Hoenecke as a private tutor in the home of a certain Herr von Wattenwyl, in the neighborhood of Bern, Switzerland. He entered upon his duties on January 1, 1860, and stayed for two years. The climate was ideal for his health, which improved remarkably. Of still greater importance was the fact that here he met and fell in love with the young lady who later became his wife. She was Mathilde Hess, the daughter of a Reformed pastor by the name of Rudolf Hess in Hoechstetten, in the Canton of Bern. This fact, together with a number of other considerations, led him to the next step in his career.

At about this time the Berlin Mission Society had sent a letter to all of the universities, offering to send all surplus theological candidates to America to meet the urgent need for pastors among the emigrant Germans. The Prussian State Church also promised all candidates, who answered this call, seniority rights in the calls sent out by the State Church of Prussia. That was quite an inducement. Many candidates, among them our own Thiele, Mayerhoff, and Jaeckel, answered this call. So did Hoenecke. The Berlin Mission Society then designated him for the ministry in the young Wisconsin Synod. Through correspondence with Muehlhaeuser he was tentatively promised the congregation which Fachtmann, who also once travelled these parts in the Fox River Valley, had served in LaCrosse. Immediately he parted from his fiancée, promising to send for her or to return for her, entrained for Magdeburg and had himself ordained at the Cathedral in Magdeburg. In the spring of 1863 he then set out for America.

Having arrived in Milwaukee, he found that LaCrosse was no longer vacant. Instead, he was sent to Racine, but didn't stay very long. The daughter of one of the big-shots in the congregation developed a crush on Hoenecke, and her father didn't want a poor preacher as a son-in-law. Hoenecke, of course, was entirely innocent in this affair, perhaps not even aware of it. But it did prevent his receiving the call to Racine. Later, after he had moved to Farmington, the people of Racine found out that he had a fiancee and immediately sent him the call, for Racine was still vacant. However, Hoenecke was satisfied with the small country congregation in Farmington, of which he had become its first pastor, and returned the call. Hoenecke particularly was induced to remain at Farmington, because it was close to Watertown, which at that time was already becoming a strong Lutheran center.

At this point permit me to digress from our story. The Atlantic must have been a very busy sea during the 1850's and 1860's, in fact it must have been literally covered with Germans emigrating to the United States. In 1854, nine years before Hoenecke left Germany, a young man and his wife and one year old child also decided to find their fortunes in America. Together with other relatives they settled in the region called Farmington, in Jefferson County, Wisconsin. After they had established their own homes, their thoughts went to providing a place for worship and a school for their children. As a result they built a log church, which at the same time served as a school. The furnishings were very primitive. A low altar and two rows of benches fifteen feet long without any backs. All home-made! That was in the year 1859. A teacher by the name of Kinow had been immediately responsible for gathering the Lutherans in the locality and inducing them to undertake this work. One of the founders of the congregation was that young man we spoke of before -- his name was John Dobberstein, --and another was his brother-in-law, August Jaeck. The congregation built its simple church on land belonging to the August Jaeck's. Teacher Kinow served these people as well as he could, teaching their children and conducting reading services in the log-church. Finally, he went father to collect and found the congregation at Fort Atkinson. It was then that Immanuel's Church at Farmington appealed to synod for a pastor. Adolph Hoenecke was sent to them and served them for the next three years. When he came there, he was, of course, single. He boarded and roomed with the widow of August Jaeck, who had died in the meantime. Her's was also a log hut. And repeatedly, when Hoenecke would return from the church, being in deep thought he would forget to duck at the door-way and consequently bump his forehead. After two years of that he sent for his fiancee and they were married quietly in Watertown, by Bading, I believe. One of the members of the last class Hoenecke confirmed in Farmington, a class of eight girls and four boys, was Herman Dobberstein, the little lad who came across the ocean with his parents at the age of one, and who is now the oldest member of the Hortonville congregation, 96 this coming June. Mrs. Jaeck also was the aunt of the next oldest member of Hortonville, Mr. Robert Behrend, who will be 93 this year and was acquainted with Hoenecke during his first years in Watertown. She was also the aunt of two aged sisters, members of our congregation, who are 85 and 80 years old at present. It was a pleasure to get these people together and to hear them give these all-too-human sidelights on that great man Hoenecke. He, who later taught our Wisconsin Synod the Gospel of Jesus, in Farmington taught little boys and girls Luther's Catechism, German reading, German writing, and German arithmetic.

The rest of Hoenecke's life will be sketched very briefly, since the details will be discussed in other portions of this paper. When Synod met in Grace Church Milwaukee in June, 1863, Hoenecke was present and was accepted as a member of Synod. In 1864 Synod met in Manitowoc, where Koehler was pastor. It was at this meeting that Hoenecke was elected secretary of Synod. During the next few years he also represented the Synod at the meetings of the General Council and in discussions with Iowa and Missouri. In 1865 Synod decided to publish a synodical paper, the

Ev.-lutherisches Gemeindeblatt. Prof. Mohldenke of the recently opened seminary was chosen editor-in-chief. Hoenecke and Pastor Bading were appointed assistant-editors. In the same meeting he was elected Seminary-Visitor together with pastor Vorberg and Mr. August Gamm. In the following year he was elected to the Seminary Board of Trustees. Thus his talents and abilities quickly came to be recognized.

About this time things were not going so very well at the seminary. The president of the seminary, Mohldehnke, who had formerly been a traveling missionary, loved to travel, and sometimes cancelled all classes for weeks at a time. Discipline was also lax at the seminary. In its meeting on June 12, 1866, Synod sought to remedy the situation by choosing Hoenecke, who still was pastor at Farmington, as Inspector of the Institution and theological professor. Mohldenke, of course, resented the criticism and resigned, also leaving the Synod. From 1866 to 1879 Hoenecke then labored quietly and diligently as inspector and professor at Synod's First Seminary in Watertown. In 1868 he was one of the moving forces which brought about a mutual recognition of the Missouri Synod and the Wisconsin Synod. In 1870 it was decided to send Wisconsin's theological students to the Seminary at St. Louis, and to send Missouri's college students to Watertown. Hoenecke was destined to go to St. Louis, but doctors forbade him to accept the position because of his health. He then accepted a call to St. Matthew's Church in Milwaukee, which congregation he served from 1870 to 1890. During the last twelve years of his pastorate there, he also served as Director of the second seminary, which had been opened in 1878 in Milwaukee, first in various private residences and then in a remodeled building in Eimermann's Park. He taught particularly courses in Pastoral Theology (?) and in Dogmatics. In 1890 he resigned from his pastorate at St. Matthew's and devoted his time entirely to the work at the Seminary, which was moved to Wauwatosa in 1893. Under his direction the "Theologische Quartalschrift" was founded in 1903. In the same year, on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of our Seminary, Northwestern College created him together with Prof. Franz Pieper of St. Louis, Doctors of Theology. Five years later, on January 3, 1908, this gifted and consecrated teacher of our church, entered his eternal home, at an age of 72 years, 10 months, and 8 days. His "Dogmatics" was published posthumously by his sons. This concludes his life. In the rest of this paper we now wish to take up some special points, dealing with his influence in shaping the conservative position of our synod.

#### HOW GOD MADE HOENECKE A THEOLOGIAN FAITHFUL TO THE SCRIPTURE

It is well-nigh miraculous that Hoenecke even became a pastor. He had grown up in a home that was indifferent toward matters of faith. He himself was inclined to take up horticulture as a profession. That is what he was considering when, after his graduation from the Gymnasium at Brandenburg, he happened to be visiting at the home of the music teacher of the Gymnasium, a certain Taeglichbeck, who himself was an out and out rationalist and unbeliever. A neighboring pastor, by the name of Soergel, who happened to be a classmate of Taeglichbeck, was also visiting there. He was a man of strong and healthy physique. In the course of the conversation Taeglichbeck slapped Pastor Soergel on the knee and jokingly said to Hoenecke, who was rather frail and sickly, "See Adolph! Become a pastor and you will have it good. The remark took root, and after Hoenecke had visited Soergel's parsonage a few times, he decided for the ministry. That was God's doing, for there was no spiritual inclination on Hoenecke's part to take up the sacred study of theology.

Again, it was God's providence that he chose Halle University and thus came under the influence of Tholuck. Tholuck has been criticized as a pietist and a unionist. The charges are somewhat unfair. True, he was a member of the Prussian State Church, which was made up of Lutherans and Reformed. But in his teachings he stood for Lutheran doctrine and not Reformed doctrine, although perhaps not as clearly as he might have. A pietist he was not. In that day of rationalism everyone who wanted to remain true to the Word of God was immediately maligned as a

pietist. Tholuck was a sincere Christian, who gathered his students about him and practised real "Seelsorge" upon them. It was thus that Hoenecke by God's grace came to a living and active faith in the Lord Jesus. It is sad that this beautiful friendship was later broken up because of a misunderstanding. Tholuck led Hoenecke into the Scripture and into the orthodox Lutheran dogmaticians, Quenstedt and Calov. Thus the Lord prepared this man for his life's work here in the Wisconsin Synod.

Again, his two-year stay in Switzerland was of the greatest importance. There he became personally acquainted with Reformed, Calvinistic theology. His fiancée was the daughter of a Reformed pastor in Hoechstetten. It was only natural that these two men discussed the various doctrines. At the same time Hoenecke was spending his leisure time studying the Lutheran dogmaticians, to whom he had been directed by Tholuck. He recognized that Lutheran doctrine was based on the Scripture and Reformed theology on reason. Thus it came, that when his two years in Switzerland were over, he had no desire to enter the State Church of Prussia, which was a union of Lutheran and Reformed. This was also one of the motives that caused him to follow the call of the Berlin Mission Society for candidates to preach in the Lutheran Church in America. Perhaps these points were not quite as clear to his mind, as we have represented them, but the basic thoughts were there. God the Holy Spirit had been working in his heart through the words of Scripture. When later in Wisconsin he faced these very same problems, Hoenecke's answer was ready. It was God who made him a theologian faithful to the Scripture.

#### HIS POSITION OF INFLUENCE IN THE WISCONSIN SYNOD.

Strange as it may seem, Hoenecke made no inquiries as to our Confessional stand when he applied for a position in the Wisconsin Synod. Not knowing the historical and doctrinal background of the various synods in the United States, he was at times also, particularly at first, too ready to take things at their face value. However, experience changed that, plus good friends like Bading and Koehler. In its early days the Wisconsin Synod was not the staunch Lutheran body that it is today. The Wisconsin Synod was a child of the German Missionary Societies. These were not truly Lutheran. The men they sent out were for the most part imbued with a unionistic spirit, their Lutheranism being of a very limited kind. However, because they had been told that Lutheran preaching stood more of a show among the Germans in the middle west than Reformed theology, they chose to be Lutherans. It was only gradually that they became real true Lutherans. Muehlhaeuser himself, the first president of Synod, a man of rather meager theological training, but highly gifted in other ways, never really understood the fundamental differences between Lutheranism and Reformed theology. This became clear when we consider that in 1850 the name chosen for Synod was "Das Deutsche Evangelische Ministerium von Wisconsin." Nor were these people clear in the doctrine of the ministry; they seemingly knew nothing of the priesthood of all believers and of the rights of a Christian congregation, as is exemplified by their practice of licensing preachers and, on occasion, simply deposing pastors from their pastorate without a single word of consultation with the congregation. Many of the early pastors also were unionists, who could see no wrong in worshipping with and cooperating with Christians of all other denominations. The Prussian State Church Union Catechism was also in use in many of the congregations. Such was the Lutheranism of the early Wisconsin Synod. A thorough housecleaning was needed if we wanted to be truly Lutheran.

However, we must not think that no steps had been taken in that direction before Hoenecke became a member of Synod. The matter had become a most definite issue by the time Hoenecke was admitted as member of Synod. Most outspoken against all unionism were Pastors Bading and Koehler. When Bading arrived in 1853, he insisted that he be held to the Lutheran confessions in his ordination vow, something which had been sorely neglected heretofore, though required in the constitution. Koehler arrived in 1854. About 1855 or 56 these men, together with Sauer, Conrad, Reim and a few others, organized the Northwestern Conference of Synod, and this

conference became the center of a true Lutheranism in opposition to the mild, indifferent Lutheranism of Synod's president, John Muehlhaeuser. Repeatedly in the years to come, this conference sent letters and petitions to Synod for a more determined stand against all unionism and for strict discipline among Synod's pastors. This tendency gained the upper hand when Bading was elected president of Synod in 1860. He made it the aim of his presidency to fight unionism and to establish a seminary for the training of Synod's pastors. Such was the state of affairs when Hoenecke joined Synod. He immediately recognized in these men kindred spirits. Vastly their superior in theological, truly Lutheran theological training and knowledge, they were his superior in dealing with practical situations. Hoenecke poured the bullets, and Bading and Koehler shot them, August Pieper wrote in the *Quartalschrift* of 1935. These men valued his deep insight into and knowledge of what was Lutheran and what was Biblical, and it is undoubtedly due to them that Hoenecke was thrust into the foreground and given the opportunity to become the teacher of Synod. Thus Hoenecke soon replaced Mohldenke as editor of the "Gemeindeblatt" and professor of theology at the Seminary. In the one he taught the rank and file of Synod the fundamentals of true Lutheranism and in the other he taught and molded Synod's future pastors. True, he was not alone in doing this, but he was the guiding spirit. We cannot thank God enough for placing this man in such a responsible position. His work in the "Gemeindeblatt" may well serve as a guide for our church papers today yet. Beginning with number 2, volume 1, Hoenecke wrote a series of discussions on the Confession of the Lutheran Church, discussing all the doctrines in great detail. After finishing this series he ever continued to present other doctrinal articles. In the *Forward* to Volume 4 he wrote the following words, which are well worth remembering: "Doctrinal articles should be the main thing in our paper; they should be that which is desired and wished for most by all readers. Without clear, thorough teaching there can be no upbuilding, at least not of the right kind; a mere rousing of the feelings, touching of the heart, agitation of the emotions is no upbuilding; so-called edifying articles, that have only that as aim and nothing else, do not edify, do not strengthen faith. If teaching doctrine alone can build, then doctrinal articles are necessary." We notice that the church papers of our Synod still believe in that, and that is well. It is in that way that Hoenecke quietly, but surely, built up a constituency in Synod that was well-grounded in the doctrines of the Lutheran faith. That is why our fathers, even though they were laymen, could intelligently and clearly discuss the doctrines of Holy Writ. It was thus that Hoenecke helped to bring our Synod on the right paths, the paths on which the Word of God is a light unto our feet. He was Synod's teacher; his pupils were our teachers; may his spirit abide with us in a thousand generations.

#### HIS INFLUENCE IN SYNOD'S CHOICE OF SYNODICAL CONNECTIONS.

But we would go over to another topic, namely, Hoenecke's influence in Synod's choice of synodical connections. Muehlhaeuser, before coming to Wisconsin, had spent a number of years in New York. There he was ordained in 1837 and immediately joined the New York Ministerium, which was a member of the General Synod, which through the years became progressively more unionistic. That is, however, where Muehlhaeuser's heart lay and he kept up friendly relations with that body, even after organizing the Wisconsin Synod. In its early days Synod also received some financial help from the Pennsylvania Synod, as also some pastors. Such was the fellowship fostered by Synod's early pastors,

But matters began to ferment in the General Synod in the late 50's and early 60's. The deadly disease of unionism and indifferentism was exposed in 1857 when the unLutheran Melancthon Synod was taken up as a member. The split came in 1861. Through the years a group in the Synod of Pennsylvania had come to a clearer understanding of, and love for Lutheran doctrine, that is, Biblical doctrine. In that year (1864) the totally rationalistic Frankean Synod applied for membership in the General Synod, which was then in session at York, Pennsylvania. The Synod of Pennsylvania protested, but the indifferent majority voted to accept the Frankean Synod.

The Synod of Pennsylvania then opened its own seminary at Philadelphia and in 1866 left the General Synod, together with the Iowa Synod and a few others. Subsequently the Pennsylvania Synod sent a circular letter to all Lutheran Synods, which adopted the Augsburg Confession as their confessional statement, and called for a meeting of these synods at Reading, Pennsylvania, in December of 1866. Our Synod sent President Streissguth (Bading was in Europe) and Professor Martin as delegates to this meeting. At this meeting the representatives of sixteen synods decided on a constitution and determined to present it for approval to their respective synods and then to report back at Ft. Wayne, Indiana, on November 20, 1867, to found "The General Council of the Ev. Lutheran Church of North America." The question now before Synod was: Shall Wisconsin join this new federation or stay out? Sentiment in Synod was in favor of joining this group. Even Hoenecke was ready to join, undoubtedly because he had not been personally present at Reading and was not sufficiently acquainted with the causes that had brought about the dissolution of the General Synod. But God's thoughts were higher thoughts.

Synod met again in St. John's church, Milwaukee, from the 20th to the 27th of June, 1867. For some years already feelers had been sent out by the Iowa Synod for union with Wisconsin. Ten representatives of the Iowa Synod appeared at this meeting and were welcomed with open arms, among them the brothers Fritschl. Soon, however, it became apparent, that they had come to make propaganda for their peculiar confessional stand and for their doctrine of open questions. They considered the Confession merely historical documents showing what solution the theologians of the Reformation had found for the problems facing them and considered them merely guides to be used in meeting the problems of today. They also asked tolerance for their view concerning open questions, namely, that, though the Synod might not stand so officially, the individual members of Synod might agree to differ on the doctrines concerning the Sunday, the pope as Antichrist, the millennium, the general conversion of the Jews, the semper virgo Mariae, and others. Synod would have fallen for their arguments, had it not been for the firm position taken by Hoenecke and a number of other pastors in these matters. Hoenecke demonstrated on the basis of Scripture and the Confessions that true Christians could not tolerate such a situation. That was really the deciding factor in keeping us from joining Iowa and entering the General Council, although nothing was said concerning that officially. Synod then chose Bading, Muehlhaeuser, and Prof. Martin as representatives to represent it at Ft. Wayne. However, Muehlhaeuser died in the meantime, and Hoenecke was chosen in his place. Hoenecke played a rather minor role in Ft. Wayne but did become fully aware of the confessional character of all the other synods, which helped him fight for the truth in his own body later. The Synod of Pennsylvania, which was well acquainted with the false doctrines of Iowa, brought the famous four points up for discussion at this meeting, namely, the question of lodge membership, altar fellowship with non-Lutherans, and pulpit fellowship with the same, and Chiliasm. The gathering did not give a clear-cut decision on these points and resolved to take them up at a later time. Iowa then declared it could not as yet consider itself a member of the body and our Synod declared itself a member, but stated that it would have to present the action (rather, non-action) of the body to its own group for discussion and action.

The next meeting of Synod took place in Racine in 1868. The main point of business was the report of the delegates to Ft. Wayne, and all discussion centered about the four points before mentioned. After an intense struggle, the Bible truth being championed by Hoenecke against Pastors Vorberg, Kittel, Lucas, and Prof. Martin and others, Synod decided, "that Synod together with the entire orthodox Lutheran Church reject all and every altar- and pulpit-fellowship with false and heterodox churches as a doctrine and practise contrary to Lutheran teaching." That cost Synod the membership of Pastors Vorberg and Kittel and Prof. Martin, but the air was cleared of unionism once and for all. Bading and Hoenecke were chosen as delegates to Pittsburg, and witnessed the fact that the General Council would take no definite stand in regard to the four points. At the Helenville Synod in 1869, Synod officially broke with the General Council and declined to enter upon further discussions with Iowa.

In the meantime discussions had been going on between Wisconsin and Missouri. For a long time Missouri had refused to recognize us as true Lutherans, but gradually things had changed. It became evident that there were no longer any doctrinal differences of any kind separating the two Synods, and it was plain to both that there had been lapses on both sides when it came to practice. Hoenecke particularly can be credited with bringing the two synods together, since in his polemics he avoided anything and everything personal. This did much to pour oil on the riled waters. Full agreement was finally reached on October 22, 1868, and the official statement was signed by Walther, Brauer, Lochner, Sievers, and Strasen for Missouri and by Bading, Hoenecke, Koehler, Dammann, and Gausewitz for Wisconsin. This was to be lasting peace, which even weathered the tribulations of the Predestination Controversy, in which Hoenecke again valiantly championed Walther's doctrine as Bible doctrine and kept the two Synods together, inspite of the fact that there were some in our own midst who were ready to agree with Iowa. This agreement with Missouri led to the formation of the Synodical Conference in 1872, at which Hoenecke was present.

Before we leave this topic we must, however dispose of another matter that was really at the bottom of all our difficulties. At the bottom of the differences that disturbed the relation between members of the Missouri Synod and the Wisconsin Synod in the early years of these two church bodies was the suspicion that Wisconsin had unionistic leanings (as indeed it had), because it accepted help from the unionistic mission societies in Germany. Wisconsin had accepted their help with genuine gratitude. This feeling of gratitude for a long time prevented the Synod of taking a clear-cut issue on the matter of unionism. However, as we saw, the decisive step was taken in 1867. For some time already the mission societies had suspected that our Lutheranism was no longer the mild Lutheranism of the German State Church, but had changed into that which they despisingly called "Alt-Lutherisch." Not long after our 1867 Synod meeting the Berlin Missionary Society in an open announcement cut all its ties with our Synod, accused us of dishonesty and ingratitude, and denied us all further support. In his presidential address in 1868 Bading conceded that in the past the Synod had vacillated between its love for the Lutheran Confessions on the one hand and the feeling of gratitude towards the unionistic mission societies on the other hand, which had given financial aid and sent workers. As a result synod had appeared in a light that neither friend nor foe could understand. The time had come, he declared, to make an end to this indecision. With that, he brought up the matter of membership in the General Council. In this matter, as we have seen, Hoenecke stepped into the foreground and on the basis of God's Word convinced the members of Synod to reject all and every form of unionism once and for all. The friendship of the German missionary societies was sacrificed, but God's Word was upheld. The credit under God belongs to Adolph Hoenecke, the son of an indifferent home, the father of a conservative Synod, the product of God's grace.