

THE
HELENVILLE
PROBLEM

by

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Submitted to:

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GOTTLIEB REIM'S
"HELENVILLE PROBLEM"

The early Lutheran Church in America was blessed with a number of great men. Their long ministries rendered an incalculable service to the kingdom of God. Pastors Schmid of Michigan, Walther of Missouri, and Bading and Hoenecke of Wisconsin skillfully guarded and guided their respective churches in their important formative years. Their contributions will not be forgotten.

Gottlieb Reim seems to stand in dismal contrast to these great men. His name is unknown, his position is forgotten, and his contributions to the formative years of our synod go unheralded. In fact, it is not his work or his life at all that have even prompted this paper. Rather, it is a single cryptic sentence in Koehler's history: "At Watertown (June 22-28, 1865) Reim's place was taken by Vice-president Streissguth, Reim having resigned just before synod on account of trouble at Helenville."¹

Natural inquisitiveness always seems to ask the question, "why?" In these post-Watergate days, it would hardly be his-

¹John Philipp Koehler, *The History of the Wisconsin Synod*, (St. Cloud, Mn: Sentinel Publishing Company, 1970), p 108.

torically honest to say, "Richard Nixon resigned on account of trouble at Watergate," and say no more. The cry would go out, "Coverup!"

This paper was to search for the answer to the question, "What was the Helenville problem" of Gottlieb Reim? Why did he resign from the presidency of the Wisconsin Synod.

Gottlieb Reim (1828-1882) plied the trade of a cobbler in Obertuerkheim, Wuerttemberg until 1850. No doubt the mission zeal of the great Christian century seized his heart too. This at least in part ^{led} ~~had~~ him to enroll at the Baseler Missionshaus. He graduated from there five years later.

America called Gottlieb Reim, and in that same year, 1855, he presented himself to Pastor Muehlhaeuser as a candidate for the ministry in the infant Wisconsin Synod. His first assignment and call was to Ashford, Wisconsin.²

Reim's talents did not go unnoticed. He was almost immediately (1856) appointed as one of the supervising and training pastors for candidates Westphal and F. T. Hennicke. That same year he was asked and gave a paper on Methodism. It was criticized for smacking too much of "eternal confessionism."³ That was to be Reim's trademark as one of the pillars of the Northwestern (and later Central) Conference.

In 1857 he was chosen as president of that conference. Its members, Reim, Sauer, Bading, and P. Koehler formed a cornerstone

²*Ibid.*, p 50.

³*Ibid.*, p 50.

of the new Wisconsin Synod life, "a life of discipline in doctrine and practice."⁴ But this discipline of doctrine did not mean dead orthodoxy for Gottlieb Reim. In 1857 alone he organized three congregations. They are located in Princeton, Mecan, and Montello.

His move in 1858 draws us one step nearer to the "Helenville problem." He arrived in Helenville to begin his pastorate there on February 2, 1858.

Reim's ministry in Helenville probably was not easy. There are a number of undocumented stories that are still told of members who seemed to be exceptionally gifted in the area of arguing. Documented difficulties from the previous pastors are some of these resolutions. The ministers, including Reim, were elected annually. A resolution of April 17, 1854 says, "the minister is not allowed to keep chickens that run at large. that the minister be admonished to make a better effort in keeping school, and his son is not allowed to teach."⁵

The former situation was so bad that the pastor burned the congregational records. General concensus is that he was largely at fault. Pastor Reim charitably wrote, "*Ein Verzeichniss der Amtshandlungen frueherer Pastoren (Kleinegees Bill, u. Sinke) ist leider (!!) nicht vorhanden.*"⁶

This situation does not seem to be the "Helenville problem." By 1859 Helenville had joined the synod. Reim continued to train pastors. Candidate Sieker, who was later president of the

⁴Ibid., p 51.

⁵Helenville Congregational Minutes trans. George Reul.

⁶Helenville Kirchenbuch No. 1. Inside cover.

Minnesota Synod stayed at the Reim house and was taught there.

Only five years after his arrival Pastor Reim was elected as secretary of synod.⁷ His report on the Watertown situation to the 1860 convention⁸ and his position paper on the synod's confessional stand⁹ point to Reim's role in synodical affairs.

So when the synod looked in 1864 for someone to assume the presidency during Bading's absence, Reim was a natural choice. The history mentioned thus far gives no clue, not even an inkling of a "Helenville problem." The question remains: Why did Vice-president Streissguth receive letters dated June 4 and June 10? Why did Reim resign from the presidency of our synod on June 4 and then ask for a *zeitweilige Entlassung aus dem Ver- bande*? This was Streissguth's report to the synod convention of 1865. Reim was present.

Nachtrag: Am 4. Juni a.c. emphing ich von unserm Ehrwl. Praeses Pastor G. Reim, die schriftliche Anzeige, dass er das Praesidium niederlege und solches der Coñstitution gemaesz an mich als Vice-Praeses uebergehe.

Am 9. Juni c. richtete Pastor G. Reim das schriftliche Gesuch an mich um eine zeitweilige Entlassung aus dem Verbande der Synode, welche ich ihm unter dem 10. Juni gewahrte.¹⁰

Streissguth's immediate action seems to indicate a knowledge with the problem and a concurrence with Reim's "solution." Perhaps the problem had been discussed in the ministerium previously. Perhaps Streissguth knew of it because he was Reim's brother-in-law.

⁷Proceedings of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 1860, p11.

⁸Proceedings, 1860, p 8.

⁹Proceedings, 1861, pp 14-19.

¹⁰Proceedings, 1865, p 7.

Koehler's history and the Synod Proceedings of past years indirectly suggest two alternatives in regard to the "Helenville problem." Both *intra* and *inter* synodical affairs were at best stormy. The Proceedings indicate that each year false doctrine and bad practice took their toll in the young synod. Philipp Koehler was continually questioning Reim's handling of the relations with the Missionsvereine. These relations were admittedly ticklish because Bading was over in Germany and Russia at the time collecting money from those societies. The problem was, how can we continue to collect money from the mission societies when we are not in agreement with them?

Since Reim's election coincides with Bading's farewell and his resignation coincides with Bading's return one might even suspect souring personal relations between the two men. The only problem seems to be one of proof. There is none to support these guesses. So while it is unrealistic to say that the possible problems cited above have absolutely no connection with Reim's resignation, they do not seem to be of much significance in the matter.

It was the old church records of St. Peter's of Helenville that revealed to us the "new" clue or wrinkle. They tell of a truly "Helenville problem."

Among the blank pages in the back of the congregational meeting records is a page especially copied (?) or recorded "*aus der Verhandlungen des Kirchenraths.*"¹¹ It is decidedly out of place in the records of the *Gemeindeversammlungen*. But its contents so profoundly affected both the private ministry

¹¹From the untranslated Helenville Church Records.

and presidency of Gottlieb Reim that its discovery sheds new light on the Helenville problem.

What drove Gottlieb Reim to accept a call on April 9, 1865 to Beaver Dam? Was this related to the resignation from the presidency only two months later? The record says:

At this meeting Pastor Reim because of various circumstances, asked to be released of his duties as pastor of this congregation. A ballot vote was taken, 56 voted to have him stay, and 4 to release him. The congregation now expressed its thanks to Pastor Reim for his love and loyalty in all his tasks in his work as pastor here as well as his exemplary conduct etc. etc. Pastor Reim then asked the congregation to release him, as he felt impelled to accept his new call, however if circumstances allow in the future he would be glad to return and again serve here. He also promised to do all he could to help in getting a good man here in his place.¹²

The wording is curious in several respects. There seems to be an unusually large number of compliments for an otherwise concise record. The "various circumstances" seems to be a circumlocution, or at least a very odd way of referring to a call.

A better explanation is surely to be drawn from the acts of the church council of March 2, 1865. Those "various circumstances" seem to have been the "slander" of a Mrs. Wolfmeier. This is a name that appears among the charter members of Helenville. According to the minutes of the church council she misled and deceived the schoolchildren about Pastor Reim.¹³ (Please see the appendix for a copy of the original and a transliteration into Latin letters).

Was this a problem? For a man who was so concerned about

¹²Helenville Congregational Records trans. George Raul.

¹³Helenville Congregational Records untranslated.

conformity in doctrine and practice these accusations must have been a crushing blow. Although he was completely exonerated by the action of the church council, there must have still been considerable question about the whole affair. The ministerium was called in, and their "Gutachten" was sought. Their decision was *"eine a feierlichen Unschulds Erklaerung des P. Reim vor dem gesammten Ministerium."*

For the synod this was conclusive. They added the declaration of the Helenville church council as 5. *Motivirungspunkt* and declared his innocense. Their decision was this:

Die Synode von Wisconsin u. a. St. erklart in der schwierigen Angelegenheit des P. Reim, dasz sie:

- 1) nach sorgfaeltiger Pruefung aller Zeugenansfragen, welche in dem Protokoll der Untersuchungs-Commission vorliegen;*
- 2) nach Erwaegung des Berichts des Commites, welchem das Untersuchungsprotokoll zur Begutachteung vorgelegen;*
- 3) nach Erwaegung der Zeugenaussagen der Gemeinde-Delegaten von Helenville;*
- 4) nach der letzten feierlichen UnschuldeErklaerung des P. Reim vor dem gesammten Ministerium;*
- 5) nach Erwaegung der vom GemeindeVorstande der der Gemeinde zu Helenville ausgestellten und gerichtlich beglaubigten Zeugnisse fuer die Unschuld und das Wohlverhalten des Pastor Reim; sich von der Schuld des Pastor Reim nicht habe ueberzeugen koennen, sondern dem allwissenden Gott ueberlasse, dawz er in diese dunkle Sache zu seiner Zeit Licht bringe.*¹⁴

According to the ministerium he was innocent. The convention *"sich von der Schuld des P. Reim nicht habe ueberzeugen koennen.* They were not convinced of his guilt. So why did he resign? Why did he leave the synod *"zeitweilig"* or *"einstweilig?"*

¹⁴WELS Proceedings, 1865, p 16.

A scandal of this nature has the ability to completely ruin the effective ministry of a man in the place where it occurred. In June President Reim must have still felt that pressure in Beaver Dam, although the church council's action had been completed on March 2, 1865. So he brought his petition to the convention for a final settlement a few months later.

Concern for tender consciences, a sincere desire that the ministry be not blamed, and a hope that time would heal and that distance would soothe may have led Pastor Reim to ask for this temporary dismissal from the presidency and from synodical membership. If this is the reason why Reim left Helenville in May 28, 1865, why he resigned the presidency on June 4, 1865, and why he left the synod on June 10, 1865, it could certainly be called THE HELENVILLE PROBLEM.

But God in His grace did not let the work of Satan, that is lies and slander, stand in the way of His kingdom. Pastor Reim's heart must have been warmed by the "large number of members who accompanied him and his family as far as Jefferson and bid him farewell.

He must have found God's grace in a Macedonia call to the frontier of Minnesota where he became pastor in New Ulm. Here he could serve his Lord away from the leering eyes and out from under the shadow cast by the "Helenville problem." There he died in 1882. He met with a fatal accident while on a sick call.¹⁵

The conclusion I have reached is a heartwarming one in a certain respect. It is always a relief to learn that Christian men have been declared innocent and exonerated of false charges.

¹⁵Minnesota District Golden Jubilee History, published by the Minnesota District in 1969, p 235.

It is however more comforting to this writer to see that Pastor Reim was more concerned with the souls and consciences of people than with the right and fame of his name. He sacrificed a promising career in the Wisconsin Synod and left a congregation that he loved so that the ministry and his Savior would not be blamed.

The historical lesson to be gained from this bit of history is a valuable one. The examples are worth following. May God give us more Pastor Reim's.

APPENDIX I



Grandfather with STREISSGUTHS and REIMS—1862

REV. WM. STREISSGUTH—GEORGE BRUMDER—REV. GOTTLIEB REIM
MAGDALENA STREISSGUTH with four children ANNA MARIA REIM and her two children

The two older boys were sons of MARIA EVA STREISSGUTH, the girl between them is EMIMA STREISSGUTH ROSS.

The Reim's and the Streissguth's



CHRISTINA NOEPEL BRUMDER
The mother of George Brumder



AMALIE WOLF
The foster mother of Henriette Brumder



REV. WILHELM STREISSGUTH
Brother-in-law of George Brumder



MRS. WILHELM STREISSGUTH
nee Magdalena Brumder
Sister of George

APPENDIX II

Aus der Verhandlungen des Kirchenraths
der ev. luth. St. Petri Gemeinde in Helenville.

Helenville den 2^t. Maerz 1865.

Da am heutigen Tag die Gemeindevermaltung, die ev. luth. Gemeinde dafuer versammelt war, wegen die Wolfmeierschen Geschrifte, so in und auf langen und grausame Untersuchung und Verhaender wusten Schulkinder ausgehunden, dasz Wolfmeier mit Luegen umgegangen ist, und die Kinder unserer Schule alle belogen hat. Ihr Pater Wolfmeier wer zuletzt selbst anwesend als die Verhandlung zu Ende gieng, und hat selbst angehoert, dasz sie Luegen in die Welt hie weit schichte, und der Herr-Pastor Reim hiesigen Prediger eine grosse Verleumdung angethan haben.

Wir die Vorsteher hiesigen Gemeinde erklaren hiermit dasz Herr Pastor Reim in diese Sache unschuldig ist, un erklaren ferner dasz Frau Wolfmeier eine oeffentliche Abittung thun musz.

Dieses bezuegen Vorsteher

Georg Pfeifer

Die Abitte wurde geleiset - _____ tag den 5 Maerz von den Gottesdienst in Gegenwart der Vorsteher.

Helenville den 6 Maerz, 1865.

APPENDIX III

Act der Versammlung der Kirchenvorstände

der ev. luth. St. Petri Gemeinde in Helenville.

Helenville den 2. März 1865.

Bei der heutigen Tag der Gemeindeversammlung, der ev. luth. Gm.
meinde dieser versammlung der Welfenwieschen Gesellschaft,
wurde auf Antrag und gemeinsamer Absicht, und durch die
unmittelbar Beteiligten abgestimmt, dass Welfenwieser mit Lügen
angelegenheit ist, und die Kinder unpaar, welche alle bezeugen, dass
die Frau Welfenwieser man nicht selbst unpaar als die Versammlung
zu Ende gehen wird, selbst nicht unpaar, dass sie Lügen in die Welt
nicht schicken, und das Wort Gottes kein falsches Zeugnis
an demselben anstellen lassen.

Wie die Versammlung der St. Petri Gemeinde erklären, dass die Frau
Reiss in dieser Sache unpaar ist, und erklären ferner, dass Frau
Welfenwieser eine öffentliche Abbitte, ohne unpaar.

Dieses bezeugen die Versammlung:

Georg Pfeifer.

Die Abbitte wurde gehalten Montag den 3. März 1865 vor dem Gottes-
dienst in Gegenwart der Versammlung.
Helenville den 6. März 1865.

Photostatic reproduction from the Helenville minutes of the St. Peter's Congregation.

B I B L I O G R A P H Y

Auszug aus dem alten Protokoll=Lung der ev. ltherischen St. Petri Gemeinde in Helenville Jefferson Co. Wisc. through 1902.

Koehler, John Philipp. *The History of the Wisconsin Synod. St. Cloud, Minnesota: Faith-Life the Protestant Conference, 1970.*

No. 1 Kirchenbuch der ev. Luth. St. Petri Gemeinde in Helenville, Jefferson Co., Wisconsin, November 1857 to October 1865.

Minnesota District Golden Jubilee History 1918-1968. published by the Minnesota District of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 1969.

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