

WHAT MAKES A GREAT CHURCH BUILDER -  
LOOK AT E. BENJAMIN SCHLUETER  
FOR A GOOD EXAMPLE !

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As we enter into the age of computers, it will signify the beginning of a new era for mankind. Computers are going to revolutionize the way we live. One man will be remembered by history for bringing the computer into the home. Steven Jobs is the founder of the Apple Computer Corporation. And at 26 years of age, Steven Jobs not only designed the Apple series of computers for home and office use, but he also organized and founded his own company to produce these mechanical brains. Many people stand in awe of Steven Jobs because of his intellect and ability to create and successfully market his product so that he is already a multi-millionaire. What are his gifts? How did he do it? Could someone else have done the same thing or is he unique? These are interesting questions to pose about a man who was and is so successful at what he does.

This paper seeks to answer the same questions, but concerning another man in a different field. The man is the late E. Benjamin Schlueter. Ben Schlueter's field of expertise was in building churches. Schlueter built 2 edifices, one during the depression, as well as building up the Holy Christian church here on earth through his untiring work. Upon closer examination of his life, we'll look to find the answers of those questions previously mentioned in reference to Steven Jobs. What were Schlueter's gifts? How did Schlueter organize the building of two churches? Could someone else have done what Ben Schlueter did or was he unique? What made E. Benjamin Schlueter a great church builder?

Edward Benjamin Schlueter was born August 28, 1880, at Watertown, Wisconsin, as the third son of Mr. John H. Schlueter and his wife, Emilie, nee Kresensky. His father was a member of the Board of Trustees of Northwestern College for many years. After completing his elementary training in the Christian day school of St. Mark's he enrolled in the preparatory department of Northwestern College, Watertown, Wisconsin. In the fall of 1896, he entered the collegiate department of this institution receiving the degree of Bachelor of Arts with the class of 1900. It was here at Northwestern that Schlueter was trained in German, Latin, Greek and Hebrew. This language training not only broadened and challenged Schlueter's keen intellect but it also enabled him to read Luther in his original tongue, study the confessions and writings of church fathers, and also work in the Bible in its original texts.

The same year of 1900, saw Schlueter take up the study of theology at the Seminary of the Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States, which at the time was located at Wauwatosa, Wisconsin. He graduated in 1903. During his seminary days, he was influenced by the sainted Dr. Adolf Hoenecke, the then Director of the seminary, and Schlueter decided to dedicate his life to the Holy ministry.

With that thorough and sound training in the Scriptures completed, God ordained that Schlueter's first call take him to the rural setting of Green Lake County, Wisconsin. Schlueter assumed his call of

Pastor over the parish of Kingston, Wisconsin. He was ordained by Dr. Augustus F. Ernst, who was the president of Northwestern College for many years. This small parish would be the place where Ben Schlueter would break into his work. It was a perfect setting from our Lord for Schlueter to hone and polish his rough edges so that he could more effectively serve the Lord in the future. But only a year passed before our God added more responsibility to this young pastor's call in the form of another parish. Salemville, a village a few miles south of Kingston, also came under the young pastor's care.

Preaching two times in two different places on a Sunday is not unheard of today in W.E.L.S. circles. But one has to remember that Pastor Schlueter didn't have a car either. Transportation in those days consisted of a horse and buggy or sleigh, depending on the season. With two churches being at least 20 miles apart, that makes for a long day, especially in the winter while plowing through snow drifts or in the spring while trudging through muddy ruts called roads. Still, Pastor Schlueter carried on his ministry in this setting with faithfulness, enthusiasm and dedication. Ben Schlueter was close to his members, never showing off his education and intelligence. He preached sermons that could be easily understood by farmers, children and small-town merchants alike. He was well liked and respected by his parishioners as their pastor and as a man. As a down to earth person, Schlueter was friendly and personable with a good sense of humor. The people could feel his genuine and sincere concern for both their spiritual and physical well-being.

In 1909, God called Pastor Schlueter to serve at St. John's in Markesan, Wisconsin. In July of that year he assumed his new call to a larger church. And later that same year the Lord saw fit to increase Pastor Schlueter's responsibilities again. A Lutheran congregation in Marquette, Wisconsin called Ben Schlueter to serve them.

Markesan was a great responsibility. And yet Pastor Schlueter effectively served St. John's of Markesan and St. Paul's of Marquette. Mrs. Schlueter remembers her husband hitching up the horse to its buggy on Sunday afternoons to make the 20 mile (one way) trip to Marquette to preach. She said he enjoyed preaching wherever and whenever he could. Again 20 miles doesn't seem like much of a trip to us today, but Mrs. Schlueter remembers all of Sunday being taken up by either preaching or travelling to or from preaching.

E. Benjamin Schlueter had quite a dynamic character. Lil Manthey of Markesan can remember Pastor Schlueter increasing the size of the church by bringing many families into membership. She said, "many prominent people in Markesan began coming to church and soon joined". Pastor Schlueter wasn't only concerned with the prominent people though, he evangelized to whoever would listen to him. Mrs. Manthey's remarks must be understood from the standpoint that even around the early 1900's, many of the German immigrants were still struggling on paying off their debts. Most were farmers with

very little money. And being German, they naturally would give serious consideration to attending a Lutheran church. The other most numerous ethnic group were English settlers. They had preceded the Germans by about 30 years. They had originally settled the area of Markesan in the early 1850's. Many of them were merchants and craftsmen. By the early 1900's, they had established themselves and many were quite prosperous. And being English, they were not immediately attracted to a Lutheran church. Now, Lil Manthey's statement makes sense to us. Pastor Schlueter's concern wasn't to fill the coffers of the church treasury with "yankee" money, but rather he was concerned about serving the spiritual needs of everyone in the surrounding area of his church. It didn't matter if they were German or English ("yankee"), rich or poor.

Ben Schlueter was also somewhat of an innovator. Pastor Julius Bergholz, who preceded Schlueter, started a choir and attained a used pipe organ. But, it wasn't until Schlueter came that the choir really began to grow. The Lutheran church is a singing church and Ben Schlueter promoted this idea and encouraged members at St. John's to actively participate in all phases of church activity especially those which were musical.

In those days, the church was quite a social center. Pastor Schlueter encouraged a great deal of youth involvement by putting on plays and talent shows for fellowship gatherings in the congregation. The fact that many of the members were also neighbors who threshed

together, made hay together and visited together did a great deal to strengthen the ties between members of the congregation. These people knew each other intimately. They counted on each other. They needed each other. And they trusted Pastor Schlueter and looked to him for guidance.

In 1907, before Pastor Schlueter came to St. John's, the congregation celebrated its 25th anniversary with 92 families. They had been worshipping in a wooden structure, measuring 34' x 32' x 50'. By 1915, the congregation had outgrown this edifice. Many favored building a new church, but others, fearful of the great cost, were opposed to such a plan. Finally, after alot of discussion and encouragement by Pastor Schlueter, it was voted to build a new church, provided all the money was on hand either in cash or by pledge at the end of the year. Can you imagine that? How would you like to try and get a church building project started and have it negated if all the money for your project hasn't been given or promised, black on white?

Again we see the persuasive nature of E.B. Schlueter at work. He along with Dr. Henry Eckert and Oscar Laper contacted the members of St. John's. They got \$26,000.00 and were about \$1,000.00 short of their goal. You would think that being so close to their goal they would have gone ahead with the project. However it wasn't until the Ladies Aid assumed the final \$1,000.00, that it was reported to the congregation that all obligations had been met and it was okay to build.

With that accomplished, the actual construction began in 1916. The old church was moved off its foundation and services were conducted in it until the new church was completed. On November 27, 1916, the new structure was dedicated for use in the worship of the Triune God.

Elgard Link of Markesan still remembers this event. He recalls the church had three services that day - two in the morning and one at 7:30 p.m. He said the services were packed in the morning and he and his family attended one. His mother remarked then that she wanted to attend again in the evening. He knew it would be difficult because they farmed and would have to do chores. Nevertheless, his mother's mind was made up.

So after chores, he and his mother raced for church arriving just about 7:30 p.m. He recalls it was rather warm yet for a November evening - mid 50's or so. The church was packed, with people standing in the narthex and all the way down the front steps. He got the idea to scale a tree near a window so that he could look in the window and watch Ben Schlueter preach. His mother made her way among those gathered on the steps so she could listen. Both his mother and he agreed on the fine sermon they heard preached. Without a public address system, they heard Pastor Schlueter's sermon even though neither one was actually in the church building proper. That kind of account puts to shame stories we hear today of people not being able to hear a sermon even though the pastor is aided by a public address system.



The brick structure was a beautiful gothic design with lots of rich wood used in the interior. The windows complemented the rest of the interior and the region of Markesan itself by portraying ancient Jerusalem and agricultural scenes in subdued colors. The church is not flashy but rich in simple beauty giving all its glory to God. The total cost for everything, the building, including steam heat, pews, pulpit, altar and stained glass windows was \$27,000.00.

During this time, Pastor Schlueter was certainly a busy man attending to the Pastoral care of two churches as well as a building project and its details. And yet there was a gap in his life. Already at 35 years of age, Ben Schlueter had not worried about finding a wife. God would provide him an excellent helpmate even as God had provided Ben with so many other great blessings. He met Helene Boerner while she was teaching Hom Economics at Markesan High School. Miss Boerner was originally from Cedarburg, Wisconsin. On July 28, 1916, E. Benjamin Schlueter and Helene Boerner became man and wife. About 1-1/2 months later, three brothers of Helene came to live with them in Markesan.

Newlyweds know how difficult it is to establish a family and get to know each other. However when Helene's parents died, these three brothers were left without a home when the brother they were staying with was transferred to Texas. The ages of the boys at that time were 17, 16 and 10. Ben Schlueter graciously opened

his home up to them and there they stayed. The two oldest boys stayed until they finished high school in Markesan. The youngest stayed with them through his high school years and the first two years of college. This point expresses a sign of character of Ben. How many people today, after only a couple of months of marriage, would provide a home for two teenage boys and their younger brother until they were able to provide for themselves? Helene stated that the boys enjoyed their home life with them and Ben enjoyed having them around. Ben looked upon this responsibility of raising his wife's brothers as a joy and not a burden.

After building up Markesan's rolls by preaching Law and Gospel and guiding a building project, our Lord decided He would send Ben in another direction for His service. On May 15, 1921, the then pastor of Grace, Christoph Dowidat, asked for a release from his call at the age of 78. In 1921, Grace Lutheran of Oshkosh extended a call to Pastor Schlueter which he accepted. Soon after his arrival, the congregation decided to hold services in both German and English each Sunday instead of just in German. Also construction of a new parsonage was agreed upon and completed the following July at a cost of \$13,000.00. This home still serves as the parsonage today.

Pastor Schlueter could see the wisdom of having regular English services as was indicated by the rapid growth of membership which followed. There was a steady influx of members joining Grace.

From 1923-1927, approximately 210 communicant members were received by transfer and application while only 7 transferred out! During that same period, 107 were confirmed and 58 died, leaving a net gain for five years of about 250 communicant members.

With such continued increase in membership, it was obvious that the old church building was becoming too small. Forty five years had passed since their structure had been erected. In 1927, the congregation resolved to erect a new house of God by establishing a building fund. A committee of five was appointed with the power to enlarge itself sufficiently in order to carry out its program. The original members were F.S. Menzel, chairman; Walter Nimmer, treasurer; Pastor Schlueter, Henry Hagene and Harvey Galow. The building fund grew but not quickly enough to enable the congregation to begin construction before the financial depression of the 1930's. Because of the depression, it seemed as though all plans of erecting a new church would have to be put on the back burner until the depression was over.

The need for the new edifice remained. In the October meeting of 1930, a request was approved to ask architects to submit plans for the new church. The following April, a temporary committee was appointed to obtain these plans. Pastor Schlueter was delighted to see his fellow believers exhibit faith in their Lord to provide for this genuine need. On July 3, 1932, a permanent building committee was authorized to select an architect to prepare plans for a new church,

the cost of which was not to exceed \$65,000.00. At this time, the building fund had \$40,935.42.

The plans were submitted by architect Hugo Haeuser, calling for a stone gothic structure which would seat about 550 people. Ground breaking took place on Palm Sunday, 1933. The church was dedicated on the third Sunday in December, 1933 to the glory of God and the preaching of His saving Word.

The design of the building was described by Pastor Schlueter in these words:

"In the erection of Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church, the thought uppermost in the minds of its builders was to erect a building that should have a churchly feeling both as to the exterior and interior and express the purpose to which it is dedicated - (that it is) A House of God, A Tabernacle of the Most High.

A modified form of the historic gothic clere-story design was therefore chosen as best adapted for the expression of that purpose. Built of Iannon stone, laid in a random ashlar bond and ornamental with Valder's limestone, a natural beauty has been achieved which at once impresses with its mass as well as its rugged solidity.

This rugged firmness in the massive walls and strong projecting buttresses is especially emphasized in the front entrance and tower. It represents an adequate expression of the Battle Hymn of the Reformation - 'A Mighty Fortress Is Our God', and fittingly symbolizes the words of the 46th Psalm, 'God is our Refuge and Strength, a very present Help in trouble'.

The entire mass of the building is a silent sermon in stone, setting forth the Glory of God as it is in Christ Jesus."

Kay Schlueter Marvin remembers well the struggles that encompassed her father during this difficult financial period while the planning

stages of the church were happening. "...the building committee went ahead with their plans encouraged by Dad's urging. E. Benjamin Schlueter was a very persuasive individual." The Schlueter home was not unlike that of the great reformer Martin Luther. Kay stated, "I remember well how much of the building plans were decided at our dinner table. Mother never knew during those years how often or how many individuals would be at her dinner table at noon for this purpose".

Times were hard and money was scarce during the church's building. Nevertheless, people gave what they had, be it money, time or talent. A testimony of the stewardship of Grace's people is proclaimed by Kay: "During the building of this church, wherever possible, unemployed members, artisans, workmen and laborers of our church were used. These people were grateful and Grace church benefitted thereby". The carvings in Grace were done by the same man who did carvings at Oberammergau in Germany.

Now the building had been completed, but the debt remained. On the tenth anniversary of the new building, in 1943, their debt had been erased. This in itself was a remarkable achievement during those depression-possessed years. It was God who blessed this congregation's hard work and faithfulness under the guidance and direction of Pastor Schlueter. As busy as Pastor Schlueter was during those years with caring for his parishioners and his involvement with the building project, he was also given other duties in the promotion of the church and her Gospel at large.

The Northern Wisconsin District of our Synod had elected him their District President from 1924 to 1936. He was elected First Vice President of our Synod in 1930 and served in this capacity until 1944. His abilities as a sound theologian, preacher, organizer, and administrator were recognized even beyond our circles as the Synodical Conference elected him their First Vice President in 1930. He served the Synodical Conference in this capacity until 1944 when he was elected President of the Synodical Conference. Pastor Schlueter was the only Wisconsin Synod pastor to serve the Synodical Conference in this manner. With all of these responsibilities, Ben Schlueter faithfully carried them out.

One might wonder if any area of his ministry suffered as a result of his manifold duties. Attesting to this as objectively as possible, my sources state that none of them did. All of my sources proclaim that he was an amazing man who found time for everything and everybody. H.A. Otto of Oshkosh said, "He was a remarkable man. He was pastor 168 hours a week. It seemed that the parsonage doors were never locked and you were welcome at all hours if you had a problem or something to discuss with him. I remember Mrs. Schlueter telling in the 1940's that there was never a Sunday that he didn't preach a sermon even when he was supposed to be on vacation."

Indeed, the mark of a strong and capable pastor is that he be a good preacher. Anyone who remembers Pastor Schlueter always

comments about him being a great preacher. In looking over his sermons, I enjoyed reading them for their content and penetrating, colorful style.

His sermons over a period of time announced the whole counsel of God's Word. He preached about the importance of Christian education and said, "...the Kingdom of God doesn't come through organization, but through the simple straight forward preaching of the Word". This quote is in reference to Luther's work on the catechism which lay out God's word for our youth. He preached about the changing role of women in our society pointing out the disadvantages of a working mother. He said many are loosing their abilities and willingness to perform household functions. Women are not serving their families as best they can in some cases and take the easy way out. "The best wedding gift you can present a newly married couple is a silver-handled can opener." Ben Schlueter worked his texts through and preached doctrinally sound sermons never shying away from issues with "touchy" applications.

He was a sought-after guest preacher on many occasions in many places. He preached for Reformation services of the Synodical Conference in the 1930's at Soldier's Field in Chicago. His wife commented that he often stayed up late in preparation of his sermons accomplishing his most productive work.

What about his concern for his family and parishioners? During one stretch in the depression, the former church council chairman at

Grace, H.A. Otto, stated, "he willingly took a reduction in salary with two teachers and the custodian. The next year when restoration of these cuts were considered, he insisted that the school principal with a family be favored in the amount to be restored rather than that he receive an equal amount".

His family speaks nothing but high praise of him. He had a son, Edward, and two daughters, Catherine (Kay), and Helen (Petey). He didn't pressure any to pursue a full-time career in the church although he did provide them with sound Christian educations. Both daughters were on to college, Kay at Valparaiso and Petey at Bethany in Mankato. He stretched his time to cover his family and found some time for himself. He enjoyed Men's Club, playing horseshoes and softball.

E. Benjamin Schlueter finished his service for God and man in March of 1952. He was 71 years old. His wife received numerous cards of condolence from people expressing their bereavement and comfort. S.C. Ylvisaker of Mankato wrote, "We did not envy him the burden he was made to carry, both as pastor in the home congregation and as president in the larger group. ... Let us now rather think of Him who rose again for our justification and Who now has called another dear friend and brother, your dear father and husband, home to the Kingdom of Glory and of eternal rest and joy."

When you consider all that he accomplished in the parishes he served, all the work involved with two major building projects, and



all the work he did for our Synod and the Synodical Conference, you like myself stand in amazement. At the beginning of this paper, I asked a series of questions concerning E. Benjamin Schlueter. What were his gifts? He was intelligent, sincere, dedicated, faithful, concerned with people's problems, humorous, down-to-earth and personable. How did he do what he did? He walked faithfully with his Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave him all that he had and was. He applied himself to his work. Could someone else have done the same things he did or was he unique? I think he was unique! God made him that way even as He makes all of us unique with our own gifts. And if it sounds like I think no one else could have done what he did, that's alright, because that is my opinion. I have laid forth before the reader of this paper facts about Ben Schlueter. Now I interject an opinion that he was unique. There are few messengers of the Gospel like him that have walked this earth.

But I would not be doing justice to his memory if I didn't say that he owed it all to his God. He would confirm this thought if he were here today. And I suppose if anyone would read this paper and derive any lasting benefit, they would have to learn from Ben Schlueter by his example. He was a man who served Jesus faithfully, with all the gifts that God bestowed on him. Let that be our example of being a great church builder, building up Christ's body of believers and raising houses of worship for Him even as Ben did. All glory, praise,

and honor be to God who gave us E. Benjamin Schlueter, His loyal  
servant. Amen.

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