

FRIEDRICH SCHMID:

Was He a Confessional Lutheran?

C. H. 373

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The subject for this paper suggested itself after reading a part of a church constitution written by Friedrich Schmid, one which did not at all sound as if it could have been written by a man who took a less than firm confessional stand. Since the history of Schmid's life can be readily found in many different sources, his history will be brought in only where necessary to help illustrate his value to the Lutheran Church.

Almost any church history book will label Schmid's Lutheranism as a paper confessionalism. They will say that the confessional stand taken by the Michigan Synod formed in 1860 was due to Stephan Klingmann and Christian Eberhardt and was accomplished over the objections of Schmid. It would seem that these church historians have been less than generous with Schmid. Many of these histories use as their source the history of the Michigan Synod (which was less than complimentary to Schmid¹), a fact which becomes obvious in the similarity of expression. So, the primary source for many of the least complimentary evaluations of Schmid seems to be this one source. The purpose of this paper is to show the results of a brief study of Friedrich Schmid's life to determine how confessional he was.

The first bit of evidence as to the type of man Pfaffer Schmid was is quickly seen from his letters to the Basel

¹Geschichte der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Synode von Michigan und andern Staaten (Saginaw: F. & C. Retter Co., 1910), pp. 4-6.

Mission House and from a quick glance at the map. In his letters, Schmid reveals himself to be a man who feels very blessed to be able to serve his Savior as a missionary in Michigan. He constantly gives all credit and glory to God for all successes and for enabling him to carry out the rigorous life he led early in his career as a circuit rider who didn't have a horse to ride (at no time did Pfaffer Schmid demand that his congregations provide him with a horse, but rather he waited until one was presented to him without request). The amount of labor that he put in is close to unbelievable. In the course of his life he covered an area that included Detroit, Lansing, Saginaw, and Monroe, an area that is about 130 miles by 85 miles. He had a direct hand in the founding of some forty congregations in that area (not all of which are WELS churches today, of course). Granted, Schmid did not cover all this territory at all times throughout his career, but he did travel a good many miles, as long as he was able, to serve various congregations. His son writes that Schmid was always available to assist his parishoners, no matter what time he was called upon, and that "he often saddled his horse in the middle of the night, and trotted away, not waiting for daybreak."² Later in his life he even made an occasional missionary trip to Lake Michigan. The point in this review of his mission efforts is to point out that Schmid was a man who,

²Frederick Schmid, Jr. (Emerson E. Hutzell, trans.) The Life and Labors of Friedrich Schmid (St. Louis: Hutzell, 1953), p. 4.

out of a deep and sincere love for Jesus Christ, strove to do all that he could in the service of his Savior, an effort which manifested itself in an attitude of love for his fellowmen that saw all as men for whom Christ died and who were in need of the saving news of Christ-crucified.

The next part of Schmid's life which merits a closer look is his concern for and work among the Indians in Michigan. From the first letter he wrote to Basel, Schmid shows a great concern for the Indians. The Indians were, in his estimation (and properly so), an important mission field. He never could understand why so little concern was shown for the Indians by other men, as he reveals with these words:

The people in many vicinities would be inclined toward it [mission work, especially to the Indians], but there prevails such an indifference toward the things of God among the clergy that one's heart often bleeds in having to read the synodical resolutions consisting of empty straw, without hearing a single word about the expansion of the Kingdom of God.³

A mission among the Indians was finally begun by the predecessor of the Michigan Synod formed in 1860, which was called the Missionary Synod and was formed by Schmid with the main purpose to be mission efforts among the Indians. Schmid reported in his letters to Basel that the Lord truly wished for the Indian Mission effort to be carried out for, without asking for aid, help arrived from Bavaria (Loehe) and, to Schmid, things were finally looking up for

³Emerson E. Hutzell, trans., The Schmid Letters (St. Louis: Hutzell, 1953), p. 65.

mission work to the Indians.⁴ This joint effort did not last very long. Loehe had asked Schmid about his confessional stand before joining with him and was told that he and Schmid were in agreement. Schmid had this to say:

Reverend Mr. Loehe, who wrote us concerning the whole matter, expressed his wish and the wishes of many other participating friends, namely, to spread the Kingdom of Christ also among the poor Indians. In doing this, he asked nothing of us till now, which would be contrary to our conscience and conviction: pure teaching and adherence to the Lord and Holy Sacrament, according to the creed of our Evangelical Lutheran Church, is his condition, with which we, who for many years have founded a Lutheran Synod, are in agreement, convinced, that till now our Evangelical Lutheran church has remained pure and true in the teaching and the administration of the Holy Sacrament according to the Word. We were and are Lutherans, in what concerns the teachings and administration of the Sacraments, adhering to God's Holy Word, and in doing so we here have never been led into controversy with either the Reformed or the Lutherans.⁵

Loehe's men didn't see Schmid's stand as being confessional. We are told that ". . .it was realized that Schmid's pledges were merely paper promises. . . ." ⁶ Because of this, Loehe's men pulled out of the Missionary Synod, taking the Indian Mission with them. The major point of contention was the fact that Schmid eagerly accepted into fellowship a man by the name of Dumser who did not accept the Lutheran confessions. This spelled the end of the

⁴ Ibid., p. 74.

⁵ Ibid., p. 74.

⁶ J. L. Neve, History of the Lutheran Church in America (Burlington: The Lutheran Literary Board, 1934), p. 243.

Missionary Synod, and, to a large measure, of Schmid's Indian efforts. This incident brings up a couple interesting points of discussion.

The first point is this: how could Schmid, who claimed to be Lutheran, accept Dumser into his Missionary Synod? The answer is that Dumser was a man trained at Basel and Schmid was, above all earthly loyalties, tied to the Basel Mission House. His letters give the impression that he simply could not believe that a man trained at Basel could possibly be anything other than an excellent man. Schmid was a Basel man first of all and a Lutheran second.

The second point that the Indian Mission story brings up is a change that seems to have come over Schmid once the Indian Mission was taken from him. From 1833 until 1845, Schmid's letters to Basel were sent at the rate of one or two a year. His letter in 1845 discussed the Indian Mission effort and Loehe's request that it operate according to Lutheran confessional standards. His next letter was in 1848. From this time on his letters were infrequent. From 1833 until 1845, his letters consistently mentioned the urgency of carrying on work among the Indians. After 1845, Schmid rarely mentioned the Indians. For so many years, the Indian mission was a part of Schmid's hopes, prayers, and efforts. Finally, all his work seemed to be bearing fruit only to have it taken out of his control and to find himself without another acceptable area to carry on this

effort. It is little wonder that Schmid would be led to say this about confessional Lutherans:

As far as the rigid Old-Lutherans are concerned, with whom I have come in contact without learning to know them, I respect their sound teachings, but these people are mostly lacking in living faith, and for that reason there is so little love and so much harshness toward others. Their rigid ceremony and their strong condemnation of others are terrible things to me. I find no good fruit here, and despite the fact that a great deal is said about church, church-life and church-activity suffer.⁷

It would certainly be hard for Schmid to see any love or any fruits of faith in the "Old-Lutherans'" role in depriving him of the Indian Mission work, and yet this was not blindly striking out in an act of revenge. Schmid made an observation that is frequently made of all who strive to operate strictly according to the Word of God and the Lutheran Confessions. Love for erring brothers is never to be absent in dealing with them and correction is to be done in love also so as not to be merely "harshness toward others." The Indian Mission story seems to be the turning point in Schmid's life. From this time on, his appreciation for those whom he called "Old-Lutherans" was slight, and it's fair to say that the feeling was mutual.

The final event that will be considered in the life of Schmid is the founding of the Michigan Synod in 1860. At the time that Schmid and his Michigan brethren were considering resurrecting their "old Michigan Lutheran Synod,"⁸

⁷The Schmid Letters, p. 78.

⁸Ibid., p. 82.

the Inspector of the Mission House in Basel suggested that he join the Missouri Synod.

You write that you are about to organize a Lutheran Synod for Michigan in the Wuerttemberger manner. Wouldn't it be better if you joined the Missouri Synod of our brothers. I know very well that it is not all that one wishes, but I am too far away from the situation to be able to give you advice.⁹

This, of course, was definitely not one of Schmid's options as he saw it. These were the "stiff, imperious Old-Lutherans"¹⁰ who had caused him so much grief in the past. So he carried through on a plan for a second try at a Michigan Synod. This Synod had a confessional constitution:

The Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Michigan obligates itself to all the canonical books of both the Old and New Testaments as the sole rule and standard of faith and life, and to all the books of our Evangelical Lutheran Church as the true interpretation of Holy Scripture.¹¹

All credit for the confessional stand is given to Klingmann and Eberhardt. The position taken by the Michigan Synod in its history of 1910 is that it was obviously the work of Klingmann and Eberhardt, ". . .for Pfarrer Schmid previously wanted nothing to do with a firm confession."¹² That's not giving Schmid much credit, and it doesn't take into account his statements on confessionalism nor the constitutions he wrote for churches. In 1843, he wrote

⁹ Schmid, Jr., op. cit., p. 4.

¹⁰ The Schmid Letters, p. 82.

¹¹ Neve, op. cit., p. 244.

¹² Geschichte der Michigan Synode, p. 6.

this to Basel:

With the many church denominations here it is necessary, even though it hasn't been my request, to maintain a decisive position with regard to one's church.¹³

In 1851, he wrote:

I, for my part, aim to adhere faithfully and firmly to the sound doctrine of our fathers, the sound confession of our Evangelical Lutheran Church, wherein I find rest and the blessing of the Lord.¹⁴

Perhaps a more accurate statement regarding Schmid's feelings regarding a confessional constitution would be that he wasn't going to push for it, but if the others wanted it, it was definitely in agreement with his true feelings.

There is also a similarity between the constitution of the Michigan Synod formed in 1860 and the constitutions Schmid wrote for the congregations he started. The constitution of The First German Society in Scio reads in this way:

The undersigned members of this Congregation acknowledge the teachings of the Holy Scripture, old and new Testaments, as they are found in the unaltered Augsburg Confession and collective Symbolic books of the Lutheran Church, and dedicate themselves festively to hold the Word of God as the proper order, which in every case is to be observed by every member as the only true rule of conduct. This creed is to remain unaltered so long as the Congregation exists.¹⁵

¹³The Schmid Letters, p. 69.

¹⁴John Philipp Koehler, The History of the Wisconsin Synod (St. Cloud: Sentinel Publishing Co., 1970), p. 26.

¹⁵Schmid, Jr., op. cit., p. 1.

In Plymouth, the constitution of St. Peter's written by Schmid says this in the first paragraph, on doctrine:

Our congregation holds fast to the doctrine of the holy Word of God of the Old and New Testament as the sole source of eternal, saving Truth, and confesses herself in accord with the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, and all the confessional writings of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. This doctrine and confession may never be changed, but remains for all times the precious treasure and possession of the congregation. And though there be but three members who adhere to this doctrine and confession, to them the church and all property of the church would belong.¹⁶

Both of these constitutions are written in a confessional Lutheran manner and both are very similar to the constitution of the Michigan Synod. To say that Schmid wasn't interested in a firm confession is inaccurate.

What does all this say regarding Schmid's Lutheranism? Schmid has not been given his fair amount of credit by all too many church historians, who bring into question whether or not Schmid was a Lutheran. The old Michigan Synod was less than charitable in its statements regarding Schmid. This is not to say that Schmid is to be elevated to a position similar to that of Walther or other orthodox Lutherans. It is unfortunate, but Schmid never got around to getting his doctrine of fellowship straightened out. One could make a case for his reasoning, but the fact remains that he could never see much difference between the Lutheran and Reformed positions. He felt that making

¹⁶ Edgar Hoenecke, The First Hundred Years of St. Peter's Ev. Lutheran Church of Plymouth, Michigan (Ann Arbor: Cushing-Malloy, Inc., 1959), pp. 11-12.

a big issue of the differences was doing an injustice to one's parishoners. Perhaps, when he was the only pastor around and the people themselves didn't ". . . know the meaning of Lutheran or Reformed,"¹⁷ his stance was all right, but when there were churches of both types around, there was a difference that ought to have been delineated.

The conclusion is that Schmid was a man who was the result of his education. To his end he was loyal to Basel and he has been called "Basel's finest Lutheran representative in America."¹⁸ While he wanted to be Lutheran, he could never get around his training at Basel, a training which came out of ". . . attempts to join the hands of both Lutherans and Reformed people in obedience to the call to missionary service."¹⁹ It is unfortunate, also, that while Schmid could readily see flaws in the "Old-Lutherans," he could never spot the flaws of Basel. While he saw faults in those he called "Old-Lutherans" and criticized the whole body because of them, he failed to see that the product that Basel was putting out wasn't so great all too frequently. Several men in succession came who were

¹⁷The Schmid Letters, p. 73.

¹⁸T. W. Menzel, "Friedrich Schmid: Pioneer Missionary to the Germans in Michigan," Bulletin Theological Seminary of the Evangelical and Reformed Church, XXV, No. 4, (October, 1954), p. 44, (p. 10).

¹⁹Ibid., p. 45, (p. 11).

not faithful pastors, but Schmid never criticized Basel. If they had been "Old-Lutherans," it is questionable whether or not he would have been so quiet. Also unfortunate is the incident of the Indian Mission. It was a major part of Schmid's life and then was taken from him. That made reconciliation with other confessional Lutherans very difficult for him.

Friedrich Schmid was a missionary of great zeal and dedication to his Savior. His efforts went a long way toward getting the Church going in Michigan. Certainly, our Synod, too, can be thankful that he laid a foundation that could so readily be built upon. Schmid's Lutheranism was much better than some give him credit for, but it wasn't such that a graduate of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary would want to emulate. However, his zeal and his dedication to his Savior are well worth striving to equal.

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