

HOW STRICT A LUTHERAN?

A Look at Pastor Friedrich Schmid

and his Work in Michigan

by

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-A number of years ago, when the WELS observed Grace 125, one thing that struck me was the continued emphasis on the three congregations that were the founding congregations; besides, of course, the wondrous grace and mercy our Lord showed us in preserving our Synod for that length of time. It seemed to me that the celebration pointed to these three congregations and more or less gave them the distinction that since they were the founding congregations of the WELS, that they were also the oldest in the Synod. That bothered me because I know that that isn't true.

The congregation where I grew up is the oldest congregation within Synod. My home congregation is Salem Lutheran west of Ann Arbor. "Salem ist die erste Gemeinde in unserer Synode. . . Sie ist die älteste Gemeinde innerhalb Synode."<sup>1</sup> And so you could say that I developed a natural interest in the founding of this congregation as well as the founding pastor, Friedrich Schmid. In fact, the land which my parents own (where the house is) is the land he refers to in his letter of Dec. 1935.<sup>2</sup> This is land he bought where he planned to live with his family. He did this so that he could be "in the center of the German settlement" . . . and live "in the midst of (his) congregation"<sup>3</sup> rather than be removed from them by living in town as he had up to this time.

And so you can see where my interest in this man stems from. But rather than give a bland history of this congregation, which

would include statistics regarding Pharrer Schmid and his life, I thought I would explore the man himself; his character, his attitudes, the general rule of thumb he worked by, the type of Lutheranism he practiced. For this reason, much of this essay will be impressions taken from the volume of letters he wrote back to the Mission House in Basel, Switzerland.

I

First we will concern ourselves with the man himself. What kind of person was he? How did he feel about the work he was doing? How did he feel about his call? etc.

Friedrich Schmid was a 26 yr old Wuertemberger when he graduated from the Mission House in Basel. He had spent 5 years in study for this day. But Schmid had entertained thoughts of becoming a preacher much earlier, as early as 6 years old. These thoughts so occupied his time that he neglected learning his father's trade. But after talking with his teacher, Abraham Scholdern, he applied himself to learning that trade. This was because Scholdern told Schmid that one must be faithful to his immediate calling.<sup>4</sup> As will become obvious, this advice remained with him throughout his life.

Eventually though, by the appeal of this teacher, Schmid did enter the school in Basel. In April, 1833, he was ordained a minister and he received his call through the Mission School to the Germans in Michigan. "After prayerful meditation, he accepted the call. 'I accept with joy the call, as it were from my Jesus Christ through his servants in America.'<sup>5</sup>

And so, Friedrich Schmid became the first German pastor in Michigan. As he was journeying through France, it's striking to note how he felt when he left his friends:

Everyone remained behind (as he was leaving) except one, the Lord. For whom I lived and whom I desired to serve. He will accompany me. He must take the place of the society of my dear brothers, and He, I am sure, will do that.<sup>6</sup>

Schmid trusted greatly in the Lord. He was leaving family and friends behind; no doubt he felt very alone. But he still trusted in that One who never leaves. "The Lord has called me. He will be my Shepherd and God of Mercy."<sup>7</sup>

When Schmid arrived in America, he immediately set himself to work. After looking up Jonathon Mann, the person who had written Basel asking for a pastor, he went around the country on foot, visiting the Germans who had come to his first service. It was obvious to him that these people were very happy and glad that there was a pastor who could now bring them the Word and Sacrament.

He was very concerned about serving as many of these scattered Germans as he could. And so, within the time of his ministry, he organized congregations in many parts of the state -- Detroit, Monroe, Ypsilanti, Plymouth, Wayne, Waterloo, Freedom, Northfield, Lansing, Grand Rapids, Saginaw, Sebawaing, Marshall and other places. As is now evident, Schmid was more of a "circuit rider" than a pastor of one congregation. It was a common thing for him to walk seven miles on a given Sunday morning to conduct services.

Indeed, Schmid felt a great need to bring these people the Word and Sacrament. For he found that they had forgotten many things after being unable to hear the Word for as little as two years. In one of his letters back to the Mission House in Basel, he asked for additional help, help so that these people could be better served, since he didn't feel he was capable of serving them adequately. Since they were scattered throughout the lower part of Michigan, he was only able to see some of them once every five or six weeks.

Also he was deeply concerned about the heathen Indians. This was the main thrust of his training at Basel -- to bring the message of the Gospel to the heathen, to those who know nothing about Christ. To this end, the congregation in Sebewaing was organized, to serve also the heathen Indians near it.

Schmid was filled with a high pitched zeal to carry out his Lord's command to bring the Gospel to lost souls. He wasn't out to try and get rich. He didn't even want a salary.

I for my part do not expect this. If I just have enough food and clothing, that will suffice. To travel, if that be the wish of the Lord, He will provide the necessary money, come from where it may.<sup>8</sup>

And he was provided for. When he'd be making his home visits, he often would spend the night with their invitation. In this way he learned about the people who had called him.

## II

What kind of people were these Germans whom he served? Were they all equally eager to have their own pastor? From his letters,

we learn that these people lived apart from one another -- at least 2 miles apart. The families he served took in at least a 12 mile area all together. This explains the distances he traveled in visiting them. They were mostly farmers, families who had to clear the land of the trees and build their own log houses, etc. But the land, Schmid remarks, was not too difficult to clear. It was a beautiful, rolling area.

One thing that Schmid makes a point of though, is the spiritual condition of these people. Lest his teachers in Basel get a wrong impression, he pointed out that sin was just as rampant among those in America as it was in Europe. There was cheating, greediness, as well as stealing and murder. Satan had made his inroads here as he had done elsewhere. Thus the reason for Schmid's call for more help to serve the Germans. The condition he found his fellow Germans in was so bad that he wrote:

I once believed that our Missionary Institution extended only to the heathen world, but I would now like to acclaim to all missionary friends over there: Can you see your German brothers sink into heathenism while heathen become Christian? We must, therefore, do this (come to their help) and must not let up on spreading God's Word concerning the Cross to both Christian and heathen souls, which the love of Christ, which is universal, commands us.?

Another thing came to his attention soon after he had begun serving them. He found that there were only a few people who had requested a pastor, via the letter of Jonathon Mann. Most were afraid that they would not be able to pay for his services. It appears that hard feelings extended to the point where people

were not even talking to one another. A factious spirit had broken out among the congregation.

This was the way Schmid found things when he arrived in Ann Arbor after his first round of home visits. There were the type of people he came to serve. It's obvious that he indeed had his work cut out for him.

### III

Now we may ask the question: How did he serve them? Part of this answer has already been alluded to. He served them faithfully, as is attested to by his energetic nature spoken of previously. But what did he serve them with?

Many times he speaks of serving the people with Word and Sacrament. This is basically what he did. He spoke God's Word to them, whether it was the Law, which he no doubt had to use on the factions in the congregation, or the Gospel, which he used to comfort the sick, etc. His message was the basic Law-Gospel message about our crucified Savior. He writes thus:

Through the spreading of the Gospel, sinners are invited; the crucified one announced; repentance and faith preached where the poor servant of Christ has nothing other than that which he receives under the cross of Jesus and what the Holy Ghost accomplishes through the Word of God.<sup>10</sup>

Schmid preached the simple message of Christ crucified as the Savior of all sins. This is what was needed by the people, because they had fallen into the same traps of the heathen. They weren't able to handle the more difficult doctrines of the Bible. So Schmid knew only Christ crucified among them.

IV

Now what type of Lutheranism did Schmid represent in his preaching? Many have accused him of being unionistic, pointing to the fact that he administered the Sacrament to both Lutheran and Reformed people. And perhaps they are right. He did serve people of those two different faiths. At least people of both groups came to his services and received the Sacrament together. In that sense, he was unionistic.

Going further, Schmid always refused to strictly subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions. He felt compelled to preach the Word of God only and not mix that up with the confessions. What he didn't see was how the confessions followed Scripture in dealing with practical issues such as church fellowship. This point, fellowship, <sup>became</sup> ~~was~~ the bone of contention between Schmid and Loehe and the Frankonian mission efforts.

I even got the feeling that Schmid didn't think there was much of a difference between the Reformed and the Lutheran. For in a letter to Basel, where he's requesting that a pastor be sent to a certain reformed group, he writes:

I would, therefore, advise that you send a brother who was brought up in the Reformed church, if that is possible; but if that is not possible, one from the Lutheran church would be acceptable, for any brother who comes in the name of his Lord and is anointed with the spirit from on high, once he preaches the precious true Gospel among these people, they will no longer ask whether he is Lutheran or Reformed. 11

Schmid, then, did emphasize a mild type of Lutheranism, one that emphasized Christ, our Savior crucified for our sins on the cross. This was a Lutheranism that wasn't as confessional as we today might have hoped for. Why did he feel this way?



First of all, he was, no doubt, trained this way in Basel. One factor, I feel, is that he wanted to see and encouraged a living Christianity among his parishoners, a Christianity that would be expressed in actions. He compared this with the Alt-Lutheraner. This was the old Lutheran, the strict Lutheran. Their form of Christianity had developed into a dead orthodoxy. People were Christians only in church and not outside it. Schmid though, wanted to see his people truly living their faith. And so he rejected the strict Lutheran position. Perhaps another reason that he was not so strict about Lutherans and Reformed worshipping together is because of the bad things he experienced with regard to the factions in his congregation. He wanted to unite them in a true Christian spirit.

But in all of these considerations, it must be remembered what the conditions were like in these pioneer days. The Germans were scattered across a large area and they were gradually being led away into sinfulness and wickedness because of the lack of spiritual care. Schmid was the only minister to serve them. And so he served them, preaching God's Word to them and administering the Sacrament to them if they wished. If we were placed in similar circumstances, would we have followed our fellowship principles strictly, and to the letter, as Schmid did not? It's hard to say. We must commend him that his main concern was for lost souls, that they learn of Jesus as their Savior.

How strict a Lutheran? Really he was not that strict, but did he need to be? Rather than judge him on his strict orthodoxy,

or lack of it, let us evaluate him by means of what he did do. He trusted greatly in his Lord to take care of him. He brought souls lost in heathenism back to the true Light. He set up the ground work for many congregations in Michigan. Truly he was an instrument of God in spreading His Gospel message in the early 1800's. May we, as future workers in God's Kingdom, be as zealous a worker in spreading that Gospel light to souls lost in darkness as Schmid was.

Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> W. Bodamer, "Hundertjähriges Jubiläum der Ev.=Luth. Salems=  
Gemeinde zu Scio, Michigan," Evangelisch=Lutherisches Gemeinde=  
Blatt, Jahrg. 68, No. 22 (29 October 1933), p 343.

<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Schmid, tr. by Emerson Hutzel, The Schmid Letters,  
St. Louis, 1953, p 44.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p 44.

<sup>4</sup> John P. Koehler, The History of the Wisconsin Synod, St. Cloud,  
Minn., 1970, p 26.

<sup>5</sup> Schmid, Op. Cit., forward.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p 1.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p 2.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p 11.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p 15.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p 15.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p 38.

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