

## THE DUBS-ESHER SPLIT

### 100 YEARS LATER

**EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION:** This series of articles commemorates the 100th anniversary of the 1894 formation of the United Evangelical Church -- the culmination of a bitter, unfortunate and unnecessary split in the Evangelical Association founded by Jacob Albright.

The principals in the controversy -- viz., Solomon Neitz, Francis Hoffman, W.W. Orwig, J.J. Esher, Rudolph Dubs and Thomas Bowman -- were all respected leaders in the Association whose contributions to the denomination are given in various published histories. While the individual articles in the series cover the events of the 1890's that immediately preceded the division, the long and complicated development of the controversy may be summarized as follows.

1857: Rev. Solomon Neitz of the East Pennsylvania Conference published a pamphlet on Christian living that appeared to over-emphasize the salvation experience and minimize entire sanctification -- maintaining that (1) all true believers possess sanctification, (2) the doctrine of entire sanctification is not apostolic, (3) inbred sin is not entirely taken away in this life but is only covered, is capable of intruding into the life of a Christian, and is not destroyed until physical death. The pamphlet generated significant discussion and Francis Hoffman brought W.W. Orwig to annual conference to refute the tenets of Neitz and to charge the latter with violating a General Conference rule that ministers should not publish doctrinal material without first subjecting it to an examination committee. Neitz declared he had no intention of causing trouble, and he was acquitted.

1859: Following the appearance in the denomination's newspaper *Der Christliche Botshafter* of a subsequent similar Neitz article, Orwig brought the issue before General Conference. That body declared that Neitz was "conflicting with the doctrine of the Evangelical Association, on Christian holiness, contained in her book of Discipline."

1863: The General Conference voted without success on successive ballots to elect a bishop from among five nominees -- W.W. Orwig, J.J. Esher, Solomon Neitz, J.G. Zinser and Francis Hoffman. A third ballot -- limited to Orwig, Esher and Neitz -- also produced no election. When Orwig withdrew and most of his supporters voted for Esher, the latter received 35 of 65 votes and was elected on the fourth ballot. Orwig and Neitz were subsequently elected editor of *Der Christliche Botshafter* and presiding elder of the work in Germany respectively.

1867: Because the debate about sanctification had become an issue of general interest -- Bishop Esher and others writing articles upholding the conservative entire sanctification view, Neitz and others continuing to support

the alternative position -- the General Conference asked Neitz to defend his position in light of the Discipline. When he was later requested to prepare a copy of his defense, Neitz included statements derogatory to Bishop Esher and the Discipline that he had not made on the conference floor. This raised questions about Neitz' sincerity and broadened the debate to include personal attacks.

1869: A rambling doggerel written by Neitz against Bishop Esher is printed in *Der Christliche Botshafter*, now edited by Neitz' friend Rudolph Dubs.

1875: As controversy over holiness continued, the problem over language also demanded attention. While English appeared to be the language of the future, there was significant pressure to maintain the German; the English paper *The Evangelical Messenger*, for example, had been published since the 1840's but was still out-subscribed 2:1 by the *Der Christliche Botshafter*. Esher had exerted himself as a strong conservative leader during these times of conflict and was re-elected Bishop. Rudolph Dubs had personal opinions that were probably close to Esher's, but his willingness to see both sides of issues made him a favorite of supporters of Neitz and other progressives and he was elected Bishop.

1885: Upon the death of Solomon Neitz, Bishop Dubs emerged as the reluctant spokesperson of the progressive element that favored (1) departure from the doctrine of entire sanctification, (2) use of the English language and (3) decentralized church government -- including less power for the bishops, lay representation at conferences, and congregational control of individual church properties.

In summary, the most accurate statement regarding the split may be that "it was 1/3 over sanctification, 1/3 over language, 1/3 over church structure and 99% over personalities." The amount of bitterness generated by the split in communities that had competing churches during the division may often be determined by the terminology still employed by old-timers. Where the groups are remembered as "the English Evangelical Church" and "the German Evangelical Church" [typically in the midwest], there were few problems; where the names "the Dubs Church" and "the Esher Church" prevail, however, feelings usually ran high.

While the precipitating issue of sanctification was no longer a factor in 1894, those debates did bring about one interesting side effect. Methodism in the 1890's was also departing from the doctrine of entire sanctification. Encouraged by the stand of the Evangelical Association, three New England Methodist preachers left that denomination in 1892 to join the Evangelical Association's East Pennsylvania Conference. By 1896 those scattered societies [from Montpelier VT to Pawtucket RI] had become the nucleus of enough former Methodists to be set off as the New England Conference of the Evangelical Association.

**THE 1894 EVANGELICAL ASSOCIATION SPLIT  
AND THE WILLIAMSPORT EVANGELICAL CHURCHES**

**by Paul G. Gilmore, 1960**

*Editor's Note: On January 9, 1960, Paul Gilmore addressed a dinner meeting of the Adult Fellowship of St. John's Church, Newberry, on the topic "Some Skeletons in our Evangelical Closet." The presentation was well-received and followed up with an article he wrote for the church's February 1960 newsletter titled "Three New Churches in One City in One Year." The following document was created, preserving Mr. Gilmore's original language and style, from the paper he read in January and the article he prepared for the February newsletter.*

*Long-time editor of the Williamsport Daily Sun, Paul G. Gilmore was an active life-long member St. Paul's United Methodist Church of Williamsport. He worked tirelessly at Central Oak Heights and in the EV, EUB and UM church at all levels. In addition, he had the distinction of being elected a lay delegate to every EUB General Conference ever held. A friend and supporter of Lycoming College, he was granted an honorary doctorate by that institution in 1988. THE CHRONICLE is pleased to present Mr. Gilmore's paper as the lead article in this series on the 1894 split and to dedicate this volume of the journal to his memory.*

**I. The 1894 Evangelical Association Split  
or  
"Some Skeletons in our Evangelical Closet"**

In every household there is a tendency to hide family skeletons. If they can't be forgotten, at least they're ignored. While such a practice protects one's pride, however, it renders family history both incomplete and unreliable. And so this article parades some of the skeletons in our Evangelical closet.

Although we may talk calmly about such skeletons now, such was certainly not the case 70 years ago. Nor should we wonder at the bitterness of the 1890's -- for our church skeletons include divorce, forcible separations, quarrels over property, dispossession and eviction, accusations of falsehood and slander, and the ejection of sons and daughters from home.

No matter how seldom we speak of these things, or how sparingly we treat them in church history books, they will forever haunt us. The whole unhappy story is given in the newspapers from 1888 to 1894. And what doesn't appear in the news columns, or wasn't published at length in church periodicals, may be found in Supreme Court decisions of Ohio, Iowa and Pennsylvania.

Before examining these skeletons, however, let us pause to trace hastily our Evangelical beginnings.

Jacob Albright, founder of the Evangelical Association, was an itinerant evangelist for the last 16 years of his life. A first-generation American of German parentage, he was a veteran of the American Revolution. Although instructed in the catechism of the Lutheran Church, he preferred Methodism's forms and customs and was known as late as 1876 as "the organizer of the German Methodists in various parts of Pennsylvania." These words come from a local Lutheran church history that also brands Albright a "fanatic."

Without formal training, he was nonetheless a powerful and persuasive preacher in the German tongue. He was a man of intelligence and of marked ability as an organizer. A farmer who also manufactured brick and tile, he was known as "the honest tiler" and achieved an income of \$4000 per year -- that would be comparable to \$20,000 annually in today's wage scale of the 1960's. He died at the age of 49 in 1808.

In the 80 years that followed the death of Jacob Albright, his band of followers grew from 300 German-speaking inhabitants of Eastern Pennsylvania to a host of 150,000 worshipping on three continents in 2,000 churches and under the guidance of 1,250 ministers.

Then came the divorce -- more properly called a "church division."

Its first ominous signs appeared in the 1870's when senior Bishop John J. Esher and Bishop Rudolph Dubs found themselves often and violently in disagreement. The denomination's third bishop, Thomas Bowman, sided with Bishop Esher. Bishop Dubs and his "minority" following held to the democratic customs of Albright and his co-workers. They accused Bishops Esher and Bowman of being "High Church" and taking unto themselves ecclesiastical powers not intended under the Discipline of the Evangelical Association.

In 1882, Esher's son and Bowman's daughter married and further solidified the bond between those bishops. By 1883, the animosity had become so intense that clergy and laymen throughout the church were aware of it and were choosing sides. Generally speaking, the Eastern Conferences stood with Dubs and the Western ones with Esher and Bowman.

Following the General Conference of 1887 at Buffalo, NY, the quarrel grew progressively more bitter. Bishop Esher charged Bishop Dubs anew with falsehood -- a charge he had made earlier. Dr. H.B. Hartzler, editor of the denomination's paper the *Evangelical Messenger*, was deposed for taking issue with Bishop Esher. Minister who disagreed with the Hartzler verdict and/or the policies of the Esher-Bowman "majority" leadership were declared to be "in rebellion," and some were expelled.

By February and March of 1890, all three bishops had been charged with misconduct, had been tried in the ecclesiastical courts of the Association, and had been suspended. Bishop Dubs protested the verdict of the court, but he accepted its authority. He ceased to perform ministerial duties and took up editing a German-language publication that supported the "minority." Bishops Esher and Bowman refused to accept their suspensions, and it was their defiance that was largely responsible for splitting the church.

On October 1, 1891, two competing General Conferences convened. One, meeting in Indianapolis, was attended by Esher and Bowman and enough delegates to clearly represent the larger portion of the Evangelical Association; hence, it was known in the press as the "Majority." The other, called by the East Pennsylvania Conference to meet in Philadelphia, was attended by solid delegations from the Central Pennsylvania and Pittsburgh Conferences and by partial delegations from five others; as it was spurned by the remaining eighteen conferences, this gathering was labeled the "Minority."

At Indianapolis, Esher and Bowman were absolved of all charges and restored to their offices -- which they had never actually surrendered. That conference legalized all their actions. The delegates in Philadelphia reviewed their suspensions, sustained the decision of the ecclesiastical courts, and expelled Esher and Bowman. That conference then reviewed the cases against Dubs, absolved him, and re-elected him as bishop. C.S. Haman and W.M. Stafford were elected to replace Esher and Bowman.

There was no chance for reconciliation after 1891. The "Majority" under Esher and Bowman spurned all offers to discuss the differences. Appeals for "adjustment" by both ministers and laymen of the "Minority" went unanswered. Dr. H.K. Carroll, religious editor of the *New York Independent*, was called meddlesome when he launched a movement to adjust the Association's difficulties after 441 "Minority" ministers had petitioned to this effect. Said Bishop Esher: "Compromise is unthinkable. We have nothing to arbitrate."

That's how it stood as competing annual conferences, claiming authority from either the Indianapolis or Philadelphia General Conference, began appointing rival ministers to local fields. Some ministers were locked out; some evicted. In some instances, household goods were set out on the streets. By November 1891, the Evangelical Association was in the civil courts with scores of litigations.

One such litigation involved Emmanuel Church in Reading, where the Majority assigned Rev. Augustus Krecher and the Minority appointed Rev. Jonas H. Shirey. In that particular instance, the Minority formed the majority of the congregation and it "actually and forcibly prevented the said Augustus Krecher from going into the pulpit." The case was argued and appealed all the way to the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, and it became the legal precedent for resolving all related litigation in the state.

The ruling handed down by that court on October 1, 1894, favored the Majority -- i.e., the Indianapolis General Conference and the Esher-Bowman faction. In the words of Supreme Court Justice Williams, "The conduct of the parties and their sympathizers on both sides seems to have been hasty, uncharitable and ill tempered."

The Central Pennsylvania Conference stood almost unanimously with the Minority. The Supreme Court, however, had ruled that the Majority was the true Evangelical Association and that all church property belonged to the Evangelical Association, regardless of the sympathies of the congregation itself. Meeting in Williamsport on October 16, 1894, ninety-seven of the Conference's 105 ministers followed Bishop Dubs in establishing the Central Pennsylvania Conference of the United Evangelical Church. The same pattern was repeated, but with smaller percentages opting to join the dissident body, in other conferences and the first General Conference of the United Evangelical Church convened November 29, 1894, in Naperville, IL.

**II. The Williamsport Evangelical Churches**  
**or**  
**"Why Were Three New Churches Built in a Single City**  
**in a Single Year by the Same Denomination?"**

In 1894 Williamsport there were four Evangelical congregations. One -- the German-speaking church at Market and North Streets -- was loyal to the Association; it was Esherite. The other three were Dubsite; they became part of the newly formed United Evangelical denomination.

Before examining these congregations, however, let us pause to trace hastily our local Evangelical beginnings.

Evangelical influence first appeared in the Williamsport area when the family of John Rank, located in White Deer Valley, came under the influence of Jacob Albright and his co-workers. A class was formed with Rank as its leader. Affiliated with this class was Jacob Rothrock.

When Rothrock moved to Williamsport about 1812, he opened his home as a preaching place for Evangelical circuit riders. By 1831, the Lycoming Circuit had been formed, and Rothrock's was a regular appointment. The group that worshipped there was small for many years. Early converts included Henry Hartman, Gottlieb Kuemmerle, Ferdinand Dittmar and the Unterecker and Winter families.

Rothrock himself was apparently a man of standing in the country crossroads village that was 1820 Williamsport. He appears to have been a harness maker with a shop on muddy Pine Street, close to the present site of the West Branch Bank and Trust Company -- which was then a frog pond. In 1834, he was named president of the community's first School Board.

A Evangelical class was officially organized in 1849. In 1852, it bought property at Market and North Streets and erected a frame building for worship. The building itself was known to its members in a later day as "the little Snitz Box." This became the German-speaking congregation that stood with its pastor Rev. Adam Rearick and the Esher-Bowman Majority in 1894.

It was not until 1863 that the Evangelical Association looked favorably on English preaching. But by 1869 the younger element in the congregation was pressing for English services. Though the older generation persisted on German, they gave without any hard feelings their blessing to about 60 of the younger members when they proposed setting up an English-speaking congregation.

Thus the Bennett Street Church -- known as the English Evangelical Church, while the one on Market Street became known as the German Evangelical Church -- came into being in 1869. It worshipped in the Franklin School until a frame building was erected on the north side of Bennett Street immediately west of State Street. That building still stands and is now occupied as a multiple dwelling.

This congregation sided with Bishop Dubs, joined the United Evangelical Church, and lost title to its property in the Supreme Court decision of 1894. Cast from their church, they bought a site at the corner of Bennett and Packer Streets and erected a new church for \$28,000. From October 1894 until they dedicated and moved into their new building in 1895, they worshipped each Sunday in the old Curtin School -- which, perhaps prophetically, occupied the site where the First Evangelical United Brethren Church stands today.

Rev. Rearick, representing the loyal faction or Majority, administered the original Bennett Street property. He first offered to rent it to the captain of the Salvation Army in 1894. Finally, it was sold for \$1,000 to Emil Poser in May 1895.

The third 1894 Williamsport Evangelical congregation was St. John's of Newberry. It was cut off from the Lycoming Circuit in 1871. In July of that year, trustees Merrick Reeder, John Shafer and George Haist bought property "on Race Street, above Apple." A frame building that seated 300 persons was erected at a cost of \$3000.

Under the leadership of pastor W.H. Lilley, this congregation also sided with the Minority in 1894. After losing its property, the congregation worshipped temporarily in the P.O.S. of A. Hall on the west side of Arch Street, near Fourth Street. Refusing to repurchase its Race Street site from the Association, it built instead on Newberry Street at Funston Avenue and dedicated its new church there in 1895.

After the denominational division, the Race Street property stood essentially unoccupied for ten years. Although the Evangelical Association assigned Rev. John J. Heberling and Rev. John P. Freed there in 1895 and 1896 respectively, neither of those ministers was able to build up a congregation. Meanwhile, the United Evangelical flock flourished.

The Race Street Church of the Evangelical Association appears as a listing in the City Directory up to and including 1901. Lycoming County Deed Books at the Court House show the sale of the property on June 16, 1903, with John Unterecker,

Christian Winter and Christian Bower as trustees for the Evangelical Association. They sold the property to Wallace K. Fisher of Johnsonburg, Elk County, for \$610. They very next day Fisher sold the property to Funston M. Hill for \$700. The building is now a four-family dwelling, and widows high on the north side of the structure identify it as having once been a church.

With the 1903 deed is the following petition.

*Whereas, we have no hope of building up a congregation in Newberry, and  
Whereas, we have church property there valued at \$1,000,  
Therefore, resolved that we pray the East Pennsylvania Conference to grant us the privilege to sell said property and apply the proceeds to the erection of a new church on Market Street in Williamsport.*

As the cornerstone of the church at Market and North Streets indicates "rebuilt in 1904," St. John's apparently helped to finance that project to the amount of \$610.

The final Williamsport Evangelical congregation existing in 1894 was the infant St. Paul's Church on Erie Avenue. Founded in 1889 to service Evangelical families living east of Lycoming Creek and west of Campbell Street, the group worshipped in a 32x48 foot building constructed of unfinished hemlock boards and known as Hemlock Chapel. Built in the then-swampy area west of Cemetery Run, it had been raised on stilts to sit about 30 inches above the ground.

When pastor M.I. Jamison and the congregation sided with the Minority in 1894, they were dispossessed. On October 12, 1894, this little band appealed to the Williamsport School Board and were granted permission to worship in the old Clay School, then at the southeast corner of Rose Street and Vine Avenue. They then repurchased the chapel from the Association for \$500, immediately tore it down, and built larger quarters on the same site. The new building was dedicated in 1895 and reported to the annual conference to have a value of \$7,500.

And so three cornerstones of a single denomination in a single city all bear the same date of 1895 -- St. John's in the Newberry section, St. Paul's on Memorial Avenue, and the old Bennett Street Church (now occupied by the First Church of Christ, Disciples).

It is a matter of recent history to point out that the sons of Jacob Albright were re-united October 14, 1922, when the Evangelical Association and the United Evangelical Church

formed the Evangelical Church. In 1946, we further merged with the Church of the United Brethren in Christ to form our present Evangelical United Brethren denomination.

In 1922 Williamsport there were no traces of past hostility. Immediately after the denominational reunion, in November 1922, the former Association congregation meeting at Market and North Streets petitioned the East Pennsylvania Conference for the privilege of selling their church and parsonage to join with the former United Evangelical congregation meeting at Packer and Bennett Streets. Ground was broken for a new building to house the united congregation on May 5, 1923, and the present structure at the triangle of Market and Packer Streets was dedicated November 22, 1924.

So we have our skeletons -- and no reason to be proud of them, for the division ought never to have occurred. But there is a thrill to be experienced in recalling the stalwart faith, the sacrifice, the zeal, of those who built up the pioneer Church and weathered the trials of that troubled era.

Henceforth when we sing of the "Faith of our Fathers," may we have a deeper appreciation for it.



The Race Street multiple dwelling, lost by the congregation to the Evangelical Association in the 1894 split, that was the original St. John's Church.