

Chapter 15

Conference in York Reappointed to Conewago Circuit

Conference met in York this spring, 1871. At this conference I was reappointed to Conewago Circuit. During the year we build a fine Union Church¹ in Yocumtown and dedicated it free of debt. Rev. J.H. Menges,² of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in York, preached the dedicatory sermon.

In August we held another camp in the grove of brother John Parks, generally known as “Polk Hill” – but we had no excitement on the special work of entire sanctification as we had the previous year. Ministers had cooled down somewhat on that subject – and rightly, too. I do not believe that sinless perfection is attainable in this life. If so, one petition in our Lord’s Prayer is useless – as we have no need of praying daily, “Forgive us our trespasses.” I was personally acquainted with the two ministers who led off in this special movement and excitement, and perhaps the first to profess and preach it – one of whom I myself heard claim that he was so perfect that he could not sin. They have since both served a term in the penitentiary for crime – and one of them, I am told, died in the penitentiary. “Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall” – I Corinthians 10:12. They both were expelled from the church and the ministry.

This year I had the pleasure of attending a camp meeting near Bendersville, Adams County, on the Gettysburg Circuit, Rev. J.M. Price³, pastor. I superintended this camp by appointment of the presiding elder, Rev. C.F. Deininger⁴, now deceased, who could not be present. I had served this circuit from the spring of 1866 to 1867, four years ago, with great acceptability and success. And it afforded me great pleasure to spend a week with them at camp meeting, where I would have the opportunity of again greeting my old friends and acquaintances – and I was most heartily welcomed by them.

¹ This was a union effort primarily of the Church of God, the Evangelical Association, and the United Brethren Church. The Church of God had a strong membership, and after 1896 came into sole possession of the building – partly because their work was not hampered by divisions like the 1889 split in the United Brethren Church or the 1894 split in the Evangelical Association

² John Henry Menges (1825-1898) was born in Menges Mills, York County PA, and entered the Lutheran ministry in 1857. After the burning of Chambersburg in 1864, he helped to organize emergency troops to protect the state. This was part of the “100 Day York Volunteer Enlistment” of 1864, and in honor of his service a company was named “The Menges Guard.” While there was little or no Lutheran presence in Yocumtown, he was likely invited to give the dedicatory sermon as a prestigious neutral clergyman.

³ James Monroe Price (1833-1916) served Gettysburg Circuit 1870-73 as part of his 47 years in the Evangelical ministry. He is the father of Evangelical pastor Arthur C. Price.

⁴ C.F. Deininger (1826-1888) was superintendent of Carlisle District 1871-72 as part of his 38 years in the Evangelical ministry. His daughter married Evangelical pastor Edward S. Bollinger.

I preached my first sermon on Friday afternoon from Daniel 12:3, and we had a very good meeting. After the congregation was dismissed, quite a number came to me to shake hands, calling me “Brother Dietterich” – but when I could not recognize them they would say, “Why don’t you know me! I was converted at your meeting at such or such a place.” “Indeed, well, I am glad to see you. And are you still trying to serve the Lord?” would be my reply and inquiry. And I invariably received the reply, “O, yes, I am trying to.”

Among them was David A. Day and E.D. Weigle, who informed me that they were both converted at my meeting in the Cranberry school house and were now studying for the ministry in the Lutheran Church, and were home only over vacation. These things could not but be very cheering to me, so I “thanked God and took courage.” So I think it will be in the next world. When I cross over to the promised land, I expect many who have long since passed from my memory will take me by the hand and thank God that I had been instrumental, by his blessing, in bringing them to Jesus at such or such a place. And together we will bless God for his goodness, and talk over our experience on earth until we reached the happy shore. O, my brethren, and my sons in the ministry, will not that be joy indeed, and a sufficient reward in itself, for all out self-denials in this life? But this will not be all, for we shall “shine like the stars forever and ever.” – Daniel 12:3. Should not this thought inspire us with renewed zeal for the Master? Yea, to do and to dare – that we may “turn away unrighteousness” and thus increase our own reward.

Acting as presiding elder, it was my work to assign to the ministers their appointments. I appointed Rev. J.G.M. Swengel⁵, a very able minister, to preach a German sermon on Sabbath morning at nine o’clock. And as presiding elder I was expected to follow him in English at ten o’clock, and did so. Sabbath morning dawned clear and beautiful, and the multitudes came flocking in from every direction. And by nine o’clock a large congregation had assembled, when Brother Swengel preached us a very excellent German sermon. It was “short but sweet.” The Germans were not very numerous there, and he told me he would preach short – and that I should take my time to it. The people continued to come, and by ten o’clock an immense crowd had gathered on the seats and in the grove. It was now my time to preach. I was in my prime – strong and robust in health, with excellent spirits. How could it be otherwise, with my old friends before me, so many of my spiritual children looking me into the face, and the brethren Day and Weigel on the stand with me? I could not help but preach under such circumstances.

I announced my text as found in I John 2:20, “But ye have an unction from the Holy One, and know all things.” My theme was the office and influence of the Holy Spirit. God blessed me powerfully in preaching, or rather preached powerfully through me, to the people. When about half through with my sermon,

⁵ John George Miller Swengel (1840-1923) served Cumberland Circuit 1870-72 as part of 53 years in the Evangelical ministry. He is a brother to Evangelical pastors A.W. Swengel, Edwin Swengel, and [bishop] Uriah F. Swengel. His daughter married Lutheran pastor Foster Ulysses Gift.

The Divine power appeared to go out into the grove until the straggling multitude had all gathered in from the grove and stood in one solid body from the pulpit out. Not one straggler was left in the woods. The Divine “unction,” or anointing, now came. The Holy Ghost was poured out upon us, as on the day of Pentecost. Shouts broke forth on the stand, among the ministers, and the mighty wave rolled out through the altar into the congregation – until old and young were filled unutterably full of the Holy Ghost, and with power. Gray headed fathers and mothers leaped like children – and with loud voice and clapping of hands, praised God before the sermon was finished. “The joy of Jerusalem was heard afar off.” Brother Day made the closing prayer, and the people were so spell bound that they did not disperse for dinner for some time after the benediction had been pronounced.

It was a complete victory, and one of the most powerful manifestations of the Spirit’s power I ever witnessed. Some people are very much opposed to such bodily demonstrations – but for my part, I am not. If the work be real and genuine, I think we have scripture passages and scripture examples sufficient to justify it. Take, for instance, the scene on the day of Pentecost, Acts 2:1-13. While I never felt to do so myself, and while I believe with some it is but hypocrisy, and with others due to too much excitement and left run too far or go to extremes, I also believe that some are so filled with the Divine power that they cannot control themselves – as it was on the day of Pentecost, or like Paul that they “know not whether in the body, or out of the body,” at least for the time. – II Corinthians 12:2. While I never urge people to shout, or to become noisy or boisterous, I never tell them to “hold their peace” – lest I should “quench the spirit.” I think these things should be carefully handled, lest we give offense – yet they should be controlled, at least to some extent. I always did so in my congregations, and so managed to avoid extremes and check anything like “wild-fire.” This day at the Bendersville camp was a day long to be remembered.

I so increased the work on my circuit, and so enlarged the field by taking up new appointments and developing the old ones, that I was no longer able to do the work and serve the charge alone. And so I applied to the presiding elder for help in the fall. The elder appointed Rev. A.W. Bower⁶ as my assistant, who came to my help December first. Brother Bower was a fine young man and an able preacher. We had been born and brought up but three miles apart. He was converted and received into the church when but a small boy, and was about eighteen years old when he came to my assistance – and was known as “the boy preacher.” He labored acceptably on the circuit until conference. Five years afterwards he was sent as a missionary to the Pacific coast, and two years later he withdrew from the church and united with the Congregationalists – and is now serving a congregation in that denomination out there.

⁶ Amos Wright Bower (1852-1937) is a nephew to Isaiah Bower, namesake of the Bower Memorial Church in Berwick. He appears to have left the ministry at some point, for he is listed in the 1920 and 1930 censuses as a merchant. He is buried in Meridian WA.

In the fall I was called on to preach a funeral sermon for a Mr. Wooden⁷ who was accidentally shot. He was carrying a double-barreled shotgun on his shoulder, when he accidently stepped on a small stick and slipped. This caused the gun to fall from his shoulder, and it discharged as it struck the ground – the charge taking effect in his heel, and lodging in the instep of the foot. He lingered a few days and died of lock jaw. He was buried in the Quaker burying ground, one mile above Rossville – they refusing to open the meeting house for us, I preached the sermon standing by the side of the coffin in the grove in front of the meeting house.

The last Sabbath before conference I preached two funeral sermons, and my farewell sermon, in the church in Yocumtown. The first was at ten o'clock for an aged man by the name of Reeser.⁸ He was a soldier in the war of 1812 – and took an active part in it, having a horse shot under him. His funeral was very largely attended. One of his comrades in arms was present, and occupied a chair by his side in front of the pulpit during the services. At two o'clock I preached for a small child, and in the evening my farewell sermon.

At Newberry I preached regularly in the school house to a nice congregation, but the membership was quite small. They have a church and a good congregation there now. The evening before I preached my farewell sermon there, before I dismissed the congregation, I stated that our time with them was now expired. I thanked them kindly for their kindness shown to us during our stay with them, and then remarked that there were yet ten dollars due me on salary – but that I supposed they had done the best they could for me, and I was satisfied. But I said if any of them felt like doing anything more for me, they could do so after I had dismissed. I said it is needed, and would be thankfully received. An outsider arose at once and said, “He has done his duty and served us faithfully, and should be paid. We outsiders will pay five dollars, if the members will pay the other five.” It was done in a few minutes, when I had my salary in full. I thanked them kindly for it, pronounced the benediction, and bade them farewell.

Here I visited a young lady who was near the point of death with consumption. I enquired of her as to her prospects for the future, when she assured me all was well. I then knelt by her bed side and offered prayer, after which I sang “Jesus paid it all, all the debt I owe, etc.” While I sang she was filled with the love of God and praised him with a loud voice, and clapping her hands for joy, said, “Yes, Jesus paid it all, all the debt I owe, sin had left a crimson stain, He washed me white as snow.” I bade her farewell, and in a few days she expired. O how “Bless't the righteous when he dies.”

'Tis religion that can give, sweetest pleasures while we live,
'Tis religion will supply, solid comfort when we die.⁹

⁷ John W. Wooden (1832-1871).

⁸ David Reeser (1793-1872)

⁹ These are the first lines from a hymn text by Mary Masters (1706-1759). Little is known about this British poetess, and the dates given are approximate.

We had a goodly number of conversions and accessions at our meetings during the winter. Spring ended my two years on this circuit – and that being the limit, I must leave. I spent two years here very pleasantly, built two churches and – like Big Spring – found it a single handed circuit when I came and enlarged it to a double handed circuit before I left. The friends treated us very kindly. This year two buildings burnt down quite close to where we lived. The one was the house of Mr. Burger Jennings,¹⁰ brother-in-law to Rev. A.H. Irvine.¹¹ The other was the stable of Mr. Reynolds. Here our fourth daughter was born, July 17th, 1871, and received the name of Tillie Gertrude.

On this circuit I married twenty-four couples and preached forty-two funeral sermons – eleven in five families, of croup and diphtheria. I preached five hundred and seven sermons in two years. I always preached Saturday evening and three times on Sabbath – and every two weeks on Thursday evening, having nine regular appointments which I served every two weeks.

I had one wedding here which was a little trying and yet amusing. On Saturday evening a young man came to me and asked whether I could marry him at our house Sabbath evening. I replied, “I can, but not before about nine o’clock, as I have preaching at the Emanuel Church – but I can be home by that time.” He said, “All right, we will be here.” So I hastened home immediately after the service, and we waited until eleven o’clock, but they did not come. So we retired. The next week I chanced to meet him, when I said, “You rather disappointed us on Sabbath evening.” “Yes, we had not looked at the almanac until I got home. And when we did so, we found it was the decrease of the moon, and the sign was in the crab. So we thought – if we got married then, we would go backward all our life, like the crab. But now we will be married at such a house and have dinner, and we want you to come and marry us there.” O, superstition! I went at the appointed time and found a house full of people and had a very pleasant time. So, though we had lost a little sleep on Sabbath evening, we now had a turkey roast and a most excellent dinner. So all is not lost that may appear to be in danger – and I hope they went forward all their days.

I enjoyed my two years very much on this circuit – was treated very kindly, blessed with good health, and had good success. I would have been pleased to remain longer, but this the itinerant system would not allow. So I bade them good-bye and left for conference, knowing I would be obliged to move. But, O, where? Echo only answered – “where?”

¹⁰ Burger M. Jennings (1828-1906) is buried in the Emanuel Cemetery. The exact Jennings-Irvine relationship is unclear, but his first wife Catharine D. (1835-75) may have been a sister to A.H. Irvine.

¹¹ Armstrong Herman Irvine (1838-1923) was licensed and received his first appointment in 1860. He served the Milton mission 1870-73 – for three consecutive years, which was now possible because the 1871 General Conference extended the maximum allowable stay at an appointment from two years to three years.