

Chapter 19

Conference in New Berlin, Union County Re-appointed to Perry Circuit

Conference convened in New Berlin, Union County, March 1875. The day before conference met it began to snow, and continued to do so until the snow was very deep. Indeed, I think it was the deepest snow I ever saw, making it very difficult to get to New Berlin – it being located some distance from railroads. At this conference the old Perry Circuit was divided, and Perry and Newport circuits were constituted. I was returned to Perry alone – S.W. Seibert¹ as presiding elder.

The division of the circuit occasioned great dissatisfaction with nearly all the membership – outside of Newport. Some years previous a few members in Newport had attempted a division of the circuit – wishing to be separated from the circuit, with a few other appointments, so as to constitute two circuits and have a minister reside in Newport. They pressed the matter to the quarterly conference several times, but were defeated every time. The circuit did not feel themselves able to support two full salaried men, which would then be necessary, as it appeared to be all they could do to give one married man and one single man a living support. So the division was dropped for the time by its friends, and forgotten to a great extent by those who opposed it.

The Newport friends thought now would be their time to strike – and by keeping things quiet at home, they could steal a march on their opposers and through the presiding elder present the matter to conference. They hoped to gain their object and effect the division of the circuit, largely unknown to the friends on the circuit, so they would have no chance for opposition. Sure enough, all unexpected to me and the circuit, save a few in Newport, three men as near as I could learn, and a very few outside of town, and the presiding elder proposed the division of the circuit at conference. I opposed it – but it is almost useless to oppose anything a presiding elder proposes at conference, and so the circuit was divided. The upper retained the name Perry, and the lower was called Newport Circuit.

These divisions are usually effected by the “Committee on Boundaries” with the approval of conference. This committee generally, if not invariably,

¹ After Seibert served the old Perry Circuit 1870-72, he appears to have taken up residence in Newport. He was assigned to collect for the Carlisle church 1872-73 and to begin the Mifflin mission 1873-75. Evidence suggests he maintained his residence in Newport during those years, as the 1939 conference history, page 39, says of the Mifflin mission: “In the spring of 1874, Rev. Seibert of Newport secured a lot of ground on the corner of Foster and Licking Street, Mifflin, Pa.” In addition, he lived in Newport after he located in 1888, as the 1897 Biographical Encyclopedia of the Juniata Valley states: “He has a comfortable home at Newport, and preaches as opportunity and strength permit. He also superintends his farm of 196 acres, and he is one of the stockholders and a director in the Newport National Bank.” It appears he may have been a biased voice in the decision to divide the Perry Circuit.

consists of the presiding elders and bishops – and they do it frequently without consulting the membership, and even in direct opposition to the wishes of a majority of the membership as in the case of Perry. I heard an elder say this in reference to a certain circuit.

I wanted to divide it, and mentioned it at several quarterly conferences, and it was opposed every time. And fearing the division would be proposed at conference, they sent in remonstrances against it – signed by leading members on the circuit. But when the subject came up before the Committee on Boundaries, I said, “Brethren, here are the petitions against it – signed by some of the leading members. But I say divide it.” And divide it we did.

Remonstrances would have been sent in, in the case of Perry, if they had been apprised of the fact that it would be presented before conference – but being ignorant of the fact, none were sent in. And I presume the elder would have said, “I say, divide it,” and the division would have been made in spite of them.

There is what I consider the abuse of power on the part of the Committee on Boundaries – and neither preacher nor people have any redress. I was reappointed to Perry, but the membership were very much dissatisfied with the division. They said they would support me, as I had always opposed the division, but they would not support any other man. They did support me well – but I was informed that my successor did not receive two hundred dollars, and was obliged to work out in the fields to maintain his family. Not that they were dissatisfied with him, for he was a good man and has since been a presiding elder himself, but because they would not submit to the division. Whether this is correct or not I am not certain, though I have it from some of the membership. But I do know that at the end of one year after I left, it was again thrown together – all except the Newport congregation.

I had seen so much of what I considered the abuse of power – in the case above referred to where remonstrances had been sent in, then followed by the division of Perry – that I became entirely dissatisfied with the itinerant system and our church polity in general. It may be all right, and it may suit some people, but it did not suit me. I am of the opinion that the members, from whom all the money must come to carry on the work of the church, should have some say as to how things are to be conducted in the church. And the men who must pay the preacher should have some say as to who should preach for them and whom they must pay, while the men who must do the preaching should have some say as to where and for whom they should preach – and how long.

I think it should be a mutual agreement between pastor and people. But in our church neither had any say, and all was left in the hands of the Stationing Committee – which was composed of but fallible men, and men who perhaps did not always act under the immediate influence and guidance of the Holy Spirit. I found that they were not always more pious than some other men, nor did the office always seek the man – but the man the office, for I do know that the last few years

I was in the itinerancy there was at times considerable electioneering for the office of presiding elder.²

I now fully made up my mind that I would get from under the thumb of the presiding elder, and unite with some other church whose government and usages suited me, at least better. And in doing so the Lutheran Church would naturally be the first to attract my attention – having been brought up in it, my parents being members there, and one of my brothers in her ministry. But I would not do it hastily. So I gave myself two years to acquaint myself fully with her doctrines, and usages, before leaving the Evangelical Association. I at once purchased *Schmucker's Popular Theology*, *Ziegler's Catechetics*, *Luther's Catechism* and other Lutheran literature – and subscribed for the church paper – and made these my study. I served the Perry Circuit one year more, as best I could, and kept my purposes to myself and family.

During the winter Brother B.F. Anthony held a protracted meeting in a godless community known as “Shenandoah.”³ The people were virtually without Sabbath, and almost without civilization. Their Sabbaths were largely spent in fishing, hunting, drinking, fighting, etc. Brother Anthony's labors were blessed of the Lord. A great revival took place, resulting in a number of conversions – and a complete transformation took place in the entire community.

Brother Anthony went to conference and was appointed to a circuit. I took up Shenandoah as a regular appointment and organized quite a large class – making another appointment to Perry Circuit. But few of these people had been baptized, and most of them desired to be immersed. So I appointed a Sabbath afternoon to immerse them in the creek, near the school house. The day was beautiful and the turn out very large, and I baptized quite a number of them. One man was six feet four inches tall. All passed off very pleasantly. I also immersed a number in the creek near Elliottsburg. But now there was a second lot to be immersed at Shenandoah, and it was getting quite late in the fall. But to satisfy them, I appointed another day to meet at the creek, when the ordinance would be administered.

But in the meantime our fall rains came, the streams became very much swollen, and the weather very cold. We met at the creek according to announcement. The turnout was quite large again, and all were dressed in their winter clothing – with overcoats on. All things ready, and quite a number to be baptized, I took off my overcoat and waded into the creek. As I did so, I heard some standing on the shore say, “He better keep his overcoat on” – but I did not

² This was one of the issues in the 1968 union that formed the United Methodist Church. In the EUB Church the district superintendents were elected, while in the Methodist Church they were appointed. The discussions that took place on this issue were never widely publicized, but they are covered in the article “Behind the Scenes: A Document Concerning the 1968 Union” in the 2004 volume of *The Chronicle*, pages 70-77.

³ Nothing remains of this community, which was located in the mountains in Saville township, 3 miles south of Ickesburg and east of PA 17 along Big Buffalo Creek.

mind the cold in the least. Among the subjects to be baptized were a number of women. And as I took them one by one and immersed them, some once backward and others three times forward, in the wild, cold, muddy stream, it appeared cruel and indecent to me – at least. And I resolved that this should be the last I would ever baptize by immersion – and so it was.

Up to this time I had been rather favorable to immersion, and had but little faith in infant baptism – and therefore had none of my children baptized. But now my views underwent an entire change on this subject, both as to the mode and time of baptism. I now believed that the proper time to consecrate our children to God is in their infancy, and that it should be done by baptism – as the Jewish mother consecrated her child to God by circumcision. I believed that the church and her ordinances, like the gospel and salvation, are suited to all people, places, circumstances and seasons of the year. Immersion is not. I therefore doubt its being a proper ordinance of the church. And as immersion excludes children from church membership, I was ready to conclude with Rev. Cartwright⁴ of the M.E. Church “that a church without children in it resembled hell more than it did heaven.”

We held a camp meeting on the circuit in August, and I had several successful meetings during the winter – resulting in forty-five conversions. During the three years, the first two of which I had a colleague, we had one hundred and seventy-three conversions, and I preached six hundred and ten sermons in all. April 26th I delivered a lecture on Oddfellowship in the Presbyterian church in Duncannon, at the celebration of the anniversary of the order – at which time a grand time was had, and all passed off very pleasantly. I also preached a sermon in the church in Elliottsburg, February 22nd, for the “American Mechanics.”⁵ The order was present in full regalia.

Thus ended my work on the Perry Circuit. Not yet having my arrangements fully made to change my church relations, I went to conference for another circuit. On my way to conference, a good sister from York County came to see me on the cars and said, “I heard you are going to leave our church and join the Lutherans. Is it true?” My reply was, “The report is premature.” She said, “Well, I don’t want you to leave us.” I said, “I am not going to leave now. I am going to conference for work – don’t you see?” “Well, I am glad of it” – and thus the conversation ended. My views and feelings on the subject were known to but few in the church until the spring I left, as I thought it not best to make them known too soon.

⁴ Peter Cartwright (1785-1872) was a noted and colorful “backwoods” revivalist and circuit rider who personally baptized over 12,000 converts. He was also an elected legislator in Illinois. In 1846 Abraham Lincoln defeated Cartwright for a seat in the United States Congress. The statement given is from the *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright*, chapter 17 – sermon on baptism, and reads in full, “Is not that church which has no children in it more like hell than heaven?”

⁵ The Order of United American Mechanics was an anti-Catholic nativist organization originally called the Union of Workers that was founded in Philadelphia amid the anti-alien riots of 1844-45. The focus was against the hiring of cheap foreign labor and promoted patronizing only “American” businesses.