

Chapter 8

Conference at York, York County Reappointed to Buffalo Circuit

The spring 1863 conference met in York, Bishop W.W. Orwig presiding. At this conference I was ordained elder, with all my class but one – whose ordination was postponed for one year. During this session the conference, on special invitation, visited the Soldiers Hospitals¹ in a body. Here I saw about five hundred sick and wounded soldiers. Some of them appeared to be quite old men, and one poor fellow was near his last. I was again appointed to preach before the conference, and preached a national sermon. How could I do otherwise, seeing so many brave men who had laid their lives on their country's altar in her time of need.

At this conference I was reappointed to Buffalo circuit, as preacher in charge, with Rev. F. Kurtz² as junior preacher. Brother Kurtz was a young man, and it was his first year in the active ministry. He was a German, and a very fine young man, and is now one of the most able German preachers in the church. We got along most pleasantly together, and met with good success on the charge. I at first feared we would not be able to render satisfaction on this old and good charge – as I was young in the work, and Kurtz was a European and had been but ten years in this country. It was his first year in the ministry, and he must preach almost exclusively English. He moved on to the circuit, as he had a wife and one child. We went to work, did our duty, and God gave success. Shortly after brother Kurtz moved on the circuit, his fine young horse took distemper and died. The friends, however, kindly came to his help, raised the money and purchased a fine horse of the age and color he lost – and presented it to him. Truly a noble deed.

In August, the first three years draft came off. On the day of the draft, the Lycoming camp meeting began, we both ordered there by the presiding elder.³ I

¹ The large Civil War hospital located on Penn Park operated from 1862 to past the war's end, and even had its own newspaper. York's prominent Small family supported the military hospital, where 14,000 wounded Civil War soldiers were treated, and Samuel Small founded York Hospital in 1880 on West College Avenue two blocks west of where the military hospital once stood. Some of the physicians who worked in the military hospital served on the early staff of York Hospital, their skills honed by their military work.

² Frederick Kurtz (1839-1906) was born in Germany and migrated to the United States as a youth. He settled in Williamsport, where he was converted under Evangelical preaching and became a class leader. He preached in German, and in 1872 he was called to be a missionary among the German immigrants in Wisconsin. In 1876 he became a charter member of the Atlantic Conference, a conference that served German-speaking congregations in the cities along the Eastern seaboard. He died in active service in Brooklyn NY, where he is buried. He is the father of Rev. Arthur Kurtz (1880-1925) of the Presbyterian Church, and his daughter Margretha was the wife of Rev. Frederick Egger (1858-1934) of the Atlantic Conference.

³ The Lycoming circuit was north of the Union circuit, and apparently the presiding elder (district superintendent) had the authority to make such an order.

started for camp in the morning, but brother Kurtz remained at home until the next day so as to know whether he was drafted or not. I said, "I will find out soon enough if I am drafted." However, the evening before I left home for the camp I was waited on by our physician, a fine man though not a member of any church. He said he had been sent to me to ascertain whether I wished to go to the army or not. He said, "I was informed that you desire to go. If so, it is all right. But if you do not desire to go, you need but say so and we will pay your commutation, three hundred dollars." I replied, "I do not desire to go. But if drafted, I cannot help myself and will be obliged to go – unless help comes from elsewhere. He then said, "That is all we wished to know. Give yourself no uneasiness about it. If you are drafted we will pay your commutation. I was sent here by the citizens of our town to tell you."

The next day Kurtz came to the camp. And sure enough, he was drafted – but I had drawn a blank and so need not go. Lycoming County had been the home of brother Kurtz for ten years, and he had just moved away from there that spring, so during the camp the friends raised sixty dollars for him – and the friends on Buffalo circuit raised the balance and paid the commutation, so he could remain on the circuit. This certainly was a most generous act on their part. For various reasons, we had no camp meeting on our circuit.

After harvest I was called on to preach a funeral sermon in the New Columbia church for a small child, which had died some distance from there but was brought to this place to be buried. There was a very large relationship, and all most desperately wicked people. The grandfather of the child kept a hotel here in town. I preached as usual on such occasions. Shortly after the funeral, the undertaker, who was a Methodist, said to me, "You preachers don't do right when you preach funerals for such people." I said, "Why not?" "Why you ought to come out and tell them plainly just what they are. You don't preach sharp enough to them," was his reply.

In the fall a daughter of the tavern keeper took sick. She was a married woman, had a couple of children, and lived here in town. She was also desperately wicked, and cursed and swore on what proved to be her death bed. She told her husband, if she died he could be sure he had one wife in hell. She said she saw the sulfuric flames as she breathed her last. O how fearful thus to die. I was again sent for, to preach the funeral sermon. I thought of the undertaker's words, of her profanity and her death bed, and her dying language to her husband. I also thought of the hotel-keeping father and the wicked relationship. They were "a generation of vipers" – and what shall I preach? The congregation would be large, and I felt most deeply concerned for them – and I desired to do my duty, and to do them good.

I finally selected a text in Job 33:14, "God speaketh once, yea twice, yet man perceiveth it not," and prepared a sermon especially for them. After a suitable introduction I noticed

I. What is said of God in the text? "He speaketh once – yea – twice."

That is, he speaketh repeatedly. But how does he speak to us.

1. In his written word.

2. By his preached word.
 3. By his spirit.
 4. By his providence, prosperity, adversity, afflictions, sicknesses, etc.
- II. What does God say to us? When God speaks, he always says something. Now what does he say to us. He tells us
1. That we are mortal. “Dust thou art, and to dust thou shalt return.”
 2. That we are accountable. “Must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ.”
II Corinthians 3:10
 3. That we are sinners and that “The wages of sin is death.”
 4. That preparation for death is necessary, “Prepare to meet thy God.” “Be ye also ready.” Etc.
 5. He tells us how to prepare.
 - (1) By repentance.
 - (2) By faith.
 - (3) By regeneration, “Ye must be born again.”
 - (4) By a holy life, and so prepare a constant readiness or preparedness for the coming of the Son of Man.
 6. He tells us that by being prepared we shall have everlasting life, pleasures without end, etc.
 7. To neglect it is to be eternally lost. “He places life and death, and good and evil before us” and tells us now to choose which we shall have, and whom we will serve. Thus “God speaks to us” that we may be saved.
- III. The solemn charge brought against man, “He perceiveth it not.”

“He heeds it not as he should, but stands in his own light, closes his eyes and stops his ears to the counsels of God – to his own hurt. He is no wiser, no better, by the counsels of God and the dictates of his own conscience. Now,” said I, “is this not a fact? God spake to you a few weeks ago in the death of a little child – a grandchild. You attended the funeral. I preached, and we buried it. You wept over it at its grave side – but did you heed the call? No. Soon as the grave was filled and your tears dried, you returned to your same old evil ways. Today he speaks to you again. ‘He speaketh once, yea twice.’ This time he comes closer. It is a wife, a mother, a sister, a daughter – and I am told a favorite daughter. Of the dead I have nothing to say. I leave her in the hands of God, knowing that he will do what is right. But if you as her parents have done your duty to her, tried to teach her the way of life and bring her up in the way she should go – if you as her parents have prayed fervently with and for her, and set her a Christian example, then whether she is saved or lost your skirts are clear.⁴ But if you as her parents have failed, or neglected to do this, and she is lost, her blood will be required at your hands.” My remarks closed, we left the church and proceeded to the place of burial.

Brother Kurtz, who accompanied me in my buggy, turned to me and said, “Brother Dietterich, that was the plainest funeral sermon I ever heard in my life.” I waked up as one out of sleep and exclaimed in my astonishment, “Why?” “Because it was.” Was his only reply. “Well” said I, “did I go too far – or say too

⁴ “Your skirts are clear” was a then-common expression of uncertain origin, dating at least from 1830, meaning “You bear no guilt.”

much? I wanted to say all I dare say, yet not go too far, for I know them. They are a generation of vipers, and I wanted to reach them if possible.” He said, “No, you did not say too much or go too far.”

In the fall we held a protracted meeting here and had an extensive revival. Some of the most wicked people in town were happily converted to God, including a number of parents and heads of families – and among them the husband of this woman and many of her relatives, many of whom proved faithful and have since gone home to our Father’s house above. I saw in the church paper a few years ago the obituary of this very husband, and it stated that he had lived a Christian and died happy. I also saw in the church paper, years later, that the old tavern keeper had quit keeping tavern for a number of years, became converted, lived and died a Christian also – all due largely to that funeral sermon so plainly preached. Truth is mighty and will prevail, but sometimes we enwrap it so closely in smooth language so that the sharp edge of it is covered up – or in such a roundabout way, for fear of hurting the feelings of people and lest we should give offence, that it loses its power to save. In this way “the trumpet often gives an uncertain sound.”

One evening during the meeting, while I was preaching to a full house, a stranger entered the church and came up the pulpit steps to my side. I stopped preaching and turned to him. He handed me a telegram informing me of the death of my sister, Mrs. M.A. Bower⁵ of Columbia County, and said, “You must take the eleven o’clock train tonight to reach the funeral in time.” When he left the pulpit. I read the telegram to the congregation and stated the interview I had with her a few weeks previous – when I visited her for the last time during her sickness. When I bade her good-bye, I knew it would be the last time – and so did she. She said, “If we never see each other in this world again, we will meet again in heaven.” These were her last words to me. It made quite an impression on the congregation. When I invited penitents to the altar a goodly number came forward. I left the meeting in care of the brethren, went home and informed my family of her death. One of the brethren kindly conveyed me two miles to Milton – our nearest railroad station. There I was obliged to wait until one o’clock – the train being two hours late on account of frozen and broken rails, the night being extremely cold and frosty.

I then went to Rupert station, and there being no train on the L. and B. railroad,⁶ I walked to Bloomsburg – three miles – and by four o’clock in the morning I stood knocking at the front door of Rev. George Rishel’s⁷ house for admittance. He kindly took me in, gave me breakfast, and then conveyed me in his

⁵ Mercy Ann Dietterich Bower (1829-1864) died on January 9. She was the wife of Freeman D. Bower (1837-1905).

⁶ The Lackawanna and Bloomsburg Railroad ran 80 miles, from Scranton to Northumberland. It was incorporated in 1852 and began operation in 1856. The western end of the line is still in operation as a shortline railroad from Northumberland to Beach Haven.

⁷ George Rishel was ordained a local deacon in 1857. He never served under appointment, but he was the class leader at the Port Noble school house appointment, which was organized in 1867 and was the predecessor to the Bloomsburg congregation.

carriage seven miles to the funeral. Rev. Truckenmiller⁸ preached the sermon. I remained overnight and preached for him in the evening, in the Centre Church – my old home and the home of my parents, where he had a protracted meeting in progress at the time. After preaching, eight penitents presented themselves at the altar of prayer – where some years before I had knelt as a seeker of religion.

The next day I returned home and continued my meeting a few more evenings, and closed it on the Sabbath evening with communion. I had undertaken too much for the evening. I preached there on Saturday evening. Sunday morning I drove twelve miles to Elimsport and preached at ten o'clock. I then preached a funeral sermon for a child, about two miles above town, at one o'clock, drove six miles to Wisetown,⁹ preached there at three o'clock, then back home to this meeting in the evening. I thus had driven twenty-eight miles, and this was my fourth service for the day. Here I first baptized several infants and adults, which required the use of both ceremonies. Then I admitted a goodly number of new members, after which I preached the communion sermon. The house was densely packed with people, aisles and all, and the communicants were many – filling table after table. And as I served one table after another, all alone, and dismissed them, I unfortunately dismissed one table without giving them the wine – giving them bread only. I felt very sorry for the mistake, when informed of it, but it was too late to remedy it. I have never administered the communion alone since – but I think of it, and sometimes tremble for fear it should occur again. But it never has up to this time. My meeting closed with some thirty conversions and accessions.

That was the most successful meeting we had on the charge that winter. We held a meeting at the Salem church just before conference, but without much success. At this church we had a good membership. One family with whom we frequently stopped, near the church, was a family by the name of Dunkel. Brother Dunkel was a good Christian man, well to do in the world, and had a fine home – but was not a member of our church. His wife was a member, and perhaps was over anxious that he should unite with us – and so were all the membership. For years, the wife, preachers and members had been trying to persuade him to unite. He was with us, and of us, the same as a member – yet was not a member. They had been at him so much to unite with us, that he had become tired of it – and almost disgusted with them. He wife spoke to him about it once in my presence and I saw at once that it rather displeased him. I shook my head at her and simply remarked,

⁸ David S. Truckenmiller (1832-1877) was born in Milton PA and in 1864 was serving the Lutheran Church in Centre township, Columbia County. He then served as a chaplain in the 16th Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry from April 1865 until he was mustered out with his regiment in August 1865. After the war he settled in Ohio. He served the Salem Lutheran Church near Belleville OH from 1873 to 1876, when he suffered poor health and died. He is buried in the Belleville Cemetery, where the members of Salem Church paid for his headstone. He was a Lutheran pastor sympathetic to the “new measures” of Wesleyan revivalism.

⁹ Wisetown was the original name for Alvira, which was part of some 8,500 acres taken by eminent domain in 1942 for munitions manufacturing and storage. Only two cemeteries remain of what was once a thriving village.

“It will be all right yet,” and the subject was dropped for a time. I then told her privately to say no more to him about it, but leave it in my hands – and so she did.

I had never said anything to him on the subject until our meeting was about to close. Next to the last night of the meeting, I stayed there overnight. In the morning before breakfast I was sitting in the parlor alone, when he came in and sat down. When he had been in but a few minutes I laid my hand on his knee, as I sat by his side, looked him right in the face and said, “Brother Dunkel, we have been trying to do something for the church here by way of conversions, but we have met with but little success. So I thought I would see what I could do this morning by way of proselyting.” I paused, still looking him in the face, and smiled. He made no reply. I then said, “Now dear brother, the door is open for you. You would greatly rejoice the heart of your wife, and the hearts of all of our membership, by stepping in – and I believe you would feel more at home with us by doing so. What do you say? Will you unite with us or not? I know you have been very much annoyed by your wife and others on this subject, so much so that you have gotten tired of it – but you know this is the first time I have spoken to you on the subject, and I have been here almost two years. I should be glad to have you unite with us this evening, when there are a few others to be taken in. But it is for you to say. What will you do?” He replied, “All right, I will do so.” I then asked him whether he would come out and unite publicly or privately. He said, “I will unite publicly,” which pleased me very much. And when he came out with a few others in the evening, and was publicly taken in, the congregation was greatly surprised – and greatly rejoiced.

When the congregation was dismissed, all crowded around us and shook hands with him – as if he had been a stranger. And many said to me, “Why how does this come? You have done what the preachers and all have been trying to do for years but could not.” That was the trouble. They had been at him all the time, and he became tired of it. I had not, and hence my success.

We closed our work at conference time, having had a most pleasant and successful year. We had a number of very valuable accessions, and the circuit was in better condition than it had been for many years – pronounced so by the older members. We had greatly increased all our benevolent contributions, received full salary and table and traveling expenses, and valuable donations – besides assisting Kurtz in paying his commutation and getting him a horse in place of the one that had died. Surely the friends did well for us.

I had preached in the two years four hundred and seventeen sermons, in all, on the circuit – and married nine couples and preached a number of funeral sermons. This circuit I like the best of any I ever traveled while in the itinerancy. We liked the home in New Columbia, the neighbors, the country, and the people over the entire charge. They all treated us very kindly, made us a liberal donation on New Year’s day – and by their liberality I was enabled to free myself entirely from debt. And when we left the circuit I could say I “owe no man anything” but