The Otterbeins: Men of Two Worlds

by J. Steven O'Malley*

Considerable attention has been given in Pietism studies to the central figures of classical Pietism, especially Spener and Francke, and others of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. A look at the Otterbeins places us within the period which Professor Stoeffler has called "Neo-Pietism." This is the era of the latter eighteenth century, when Protestantism was being severely challenged by the new forces of the Enlightenment (the Aufklärung in Germany) and its preoccupation with reason as the norm for all areas of human endeavor. Recent attention has been given to Philip Wilhelm Otterbein (1726-1813), the Father of the United Brethren in Christ, in light of the Methodist-Evangelical United Brethren merger of 1968. However, in the course of collecting the extensive corpus of the theological works which were produced by this extraordinary German Reformed family, it became apparent that they also have significance as leading interpreters of an important tradition of Pietism at a time when it was being reshaped by the pressures of a new age.

A brief sketch of the members of this family of preachers from the principality of Nassau, Germany, will serve to indicate the measure of their importance. Their grandfather, Karl Friedrich (1667-1713), who was pastor of the Reformed Church at Schonbach, was the first in this line. His elder son, Johann Daniel, the father of our subjects, served as teacher and later rector of the Reformed Latin school at Dillenburg, the capital of Nassau. In 1728 he became pastor of the small parish at Frohnhausen, a short distance north of Dillenburg, where he served until his death in 1742. The home was blessed with ten children, with six sons and one daughter surviving childhood and

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3. The foregoing biographical data was taken from Die Reformirte Wochenblatt (June 26, 1874), pp. 201-205.
growing up in an atmosphere of warm piety and godly fear. Their mother, Wilhelmina, bore the responsibility of rearing the family in this ethos after their father's premature death. She moved the family to Herborn, where the sons could be enrolled at the Reformed University there. The school had been founded in 1584 by Prince Johann VI of Nassau (brother of Willem the Silent, the great leader of the Dutch war for independence), who desired a church that would be catholic in spirit and that would help to break down the barriers between the rigid theological parties which were then threatening to split the Reformation into warring factions.⁴ It was raised to the status of a university in 1740. Wilhelmina's devoted labor was amply rewarded as son after son completed theological study and entered the ranks of the ministry of the Reformed Church of Nassau. The eldest, Johann Heinrich (1722-1800), became the pastor of the parish at Herborn and published numerous sermons; Philip Wilhelm (1726-1813) became the leader of the pietistic wing of the German Reformed Church in colonial America; Johann Karl (1728-1807) became an instructor in theology at Herborn for fifty-six years; Georg Gottfried (1731-1800) was pastor at Duisburg and was a widely-read author of religious textbooks, devotional works and sermons on the Heidelberg Catechism; Johann Daniel (1736-1804) was pastor at Berleburg and the author of an intriguing volume on the Catechism;⁵ and Heinrich Daniel (1738-1807) was pastor at Kecken and Mulheim. Our attention will focus upon Georg Gottfried and Philip Wilhelm with a secondary look at Johann Daniel.

The Otterbeins were men of two worlds. They held before their people the beatific vision of the City of God expressed in the genre of German Calvinistic Pietism, as a reality already to be grasped in the here and now of a consciously secular age. In addition, Philip Wilhelm Otterbein bridged the Old and the New Worlds geographically, seeking to represent his faith tradition

⁴ Johann Steubing, Geschichte der Hohen Schule in Herborn (Hadamar, 1823), p. 191. I am indebted to Professor Lich of the Theological Seminary of the Evangelical Church in Hesse and Nassau for this information.

⁵ It is entitled Jesus und die Kraft seines Blutes ganz besonders verherrlicht an Johann Jost Weygard einem armen Sunder, der einem Mord begangen; und den 21, Oct., 1785 auf der Richstatte von Berlenburg, mit dem Schwerd von Leben zum Tod gebracht worden. The edition available to me was that published in Lancaster, Pa. in 1792.
where it might make its impact anew. This tradition, which is our task to explicate, is a hybrid composed of several contributory influences. These influences and their importance need to be identified and evaluated.

Orthodoxy

A basic constituent within their theological fabric was the persistence of symbols from the era of Protestant Orthodoxy, chief of which was the *Heidelberg Catechism*. It has been observed⁶ that Neo-Pietism tended to find an ally in the remaining vestiges of Protestant Orthodoxy, over against the skeptical tendencies of Enlightenment thought. However, particularly within the German Reformed tradition, the earlier antagonism between Pietism and Orthodoxy had been mitigated by the fact that the chief dogmatic symbol of this tradition (which the *Heidelberg* became⁷) was itself an irenic, experientially-oriented portrayal of Reformed theology. This is partly to be accounted for by the fact that Elector Frederick III (the Pious) of the Palatinate, who commissioned it in 1563, desired to produce a vehicle which would be edifying to the whole body of the Church in the promotion of its lifelong discipleship to the Word of God. Hence, the doctrine of election was presented without reference to eternal reprobation in an evangelical, soteriologically-related fashion in Question 1 as “What is your only comfort in life and in death?” Though the *Catechism* was Reformed in tenor, it was politically requisite⁸ that the Elector Frederick demonstrate that it conformed to the standard of the *Augsburg Confession*, and this he succeeded in doing before the Diet of Augsburg in 1566 with a fervent display of piety.

By the time of the Otterbeins, the *Heidelberg Catechism* remained the official pedagogical tool and confessional symbol of the principality of Nassau (which bordered the Palatinate to the

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⁷ The process of “confessionalizing” the *Heidelberg Catechism* has been extensively documented by Walter Hollweg in *Neue Untersuchungen zur Geschichte and Lehre des Heidelberger Katechismus*. Zweite Folge. (Lemgo: Neukirchener Verlag, 1968).
⁸ According to the provision of the Peace of Augsburg (1555), the princes of the Empire could opt for either Lutheranism or Roman Catholicism. Calvinism was not as yet given legal recognition.
A basic feature of the Herborn theological tradition in which the Otterbeins were schooled was its commitment to the anti-Aristotelian logic of Peter Ramus (1515-1572), a French Huguenot whose thought was banned at most Reformed centers of education (especially Heidelberg) during the seventeenth century. Ramus was widely regarded as iconoclastic since the deductive, syllogistic reasoning of Aristotle had become closely allied to orthodox Protestant dogma in its struggle with a revived Roman Catholicism. However, with Herborn's irenic theological temper, Ramism provided its leading theologians with a set of credos. It was used in place of a lectionary as a guide for preaching as well as a symbolic statement and as a tool for instructing youth. The University of Herborn in Nassau had had Olevianus, an author of the Catechism, as its first theological professor. During the seventeenth century, the school had developed an anti-scholastic mode of catechizing that stressed comprehending, not rote memorizing, and contrasted with the high scholasticism that prevailed at Heidelberg and Geneva. Despite this pedagogical freedom, Herborn remained linked to the orthodox outlook which held that the Bible was not to be broached in an individualistic, unmediated fashion; it was only to be understood in accordance with the framework which the Catechism provided. Georg Otterbein wrote that “the Bible is the source, and the Catechism points out the order which is derived from this source.” This dependence upon the “Old Heidelberger”, as it was affectionately called, was widely shared by the “grass roots” adherents of his church tradition. Thus, when the Otterbeins began preaching sermons and publishing studies based upon this standard, it is not surprising that they found a ready audience for their labors.

**Ramism**

9. Among the most influential was G. F. Seiler’s *Evangelische Glaubens- und Sittenlehre mit einer Einführung in die Biblische Geschichte* (1779), which supplanted the Heidelberg Catechism in much of Hesse.

with new tools for interpreting Scripture and *Catechism*.11

This approach was embodied in Olevianus' "Vester Grund", a section of his *Der Gnadenbund Gottes* (Herborn, 1590), which was an exposition of the *Catechism* not bound to its words and form. Whereas orthodox catechizing generally was conducted by memorizing and striving for intellectual assent to the logical validity of fixed thought forms, here the emphasis was upon understanding the meaning and intention of every important doctrine and finding ways to apply these meanings in day-by-day living. In a manner not inconsistent with Calvin's *Geneva Catechism*, Ramus had insisted that a "Christian philosophy" has as its goal the art of "living to God."12 Ramus had argued that traditional (Aristotelian) thought was often concerned with ideas or categories that were distracting or irrelevant to the real life situation of the thinkers. The correct goal of dialectic, he insisted, was to cut through to the problems at hand and resolve only those questions that could be drawn from real life situations. As applied to theology, this meant that a right understanding of the sections of the *Catechism* should lead not to a detached intellection but to a right understanding of the Christian life and a sure way or method of elucidating its meaning.

Georg Otterbein was concerned that we should approach Scripture and *Catechism* with personal questions derived from real life situations. Dialectical thinking is appropriate in theology only when it is used to answer questions raised by a person about his spiritual condition. Hence, the affirmation of Question 1 ("That I, with body and soul, both in life and in death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ...") is not a proclamation of objective faith to which the believer gives rational assent, as it was for the scholastic catechist; rather it provides the basis for him to admonish his

11. Ramism was introduced at Herborn in the last decade of the sixteenth century by Wilhelm Zepper and Johannes Piscator, and it found its most elaborate expression in the theological encyclopedia published there by Johann Alsted (1588-1633) See pp. 22ff. J. Steven O'Malley, *Pilgrimage of Faith* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1973).

readers to pay attention to the condition of their own hearts. "What is your only comfort in life and in death?" asks Otterbein.13 "The Questioner wants to know what kind of notion of comfort the answer has...."14 In terms of the Ramist syllogism,15 the major premise becomes the "light" ("Whoever belongs to Christ has the only sure comfort"), the minor premise becomes known as the "witness" ("I belong to Christ"), and the conclusion becomes the personal judgement or crisis ("Therefore I have the only sure comfort in life and death"). The inquirer's task is to validate the witness for himself and produce the assurance by meditation and Bible study. Scripture is the source of all topics (or loci ) that will produce the middle term. The Otterbeins often cited only partial quotations from Scripture that these might serve as a connection between the parts of the question with which their listener was struggling. Several such instances are recorded in Johann Daniel's lengthy counseling with the condemned convict about his spiritual condition,16 and also in Georg's simplified primers on The Catechism, which were pioneer efforts in "graded" religious education.17

Every inquirer, regardless of age, should approach the Bible and the Catechism (which guides him to its salvific content) with questions coming from his own experience so that the vital argument can be discovered which will produce the assurance of the witness. It is for this reason that Georg Otterbein urged an "intelligible reading of the Bible," which led him to criticize the practice of allowing children to learn to read

15. See the full discussion of this mode of reasoning in John D. Eusden, The Marrow of Theology; William Ames (1576-1633), (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1968), Introduction. The Puritan, Ames, applied this reasoning to the delineation of "cases of conscience" and was teacher at Franeker of Cocceius, who was highly influential in the Herborn tradition.
16. J. D. Otterbein, Jesus und die Kraft, pp. 65ff.
17. Georg Gottfried Otterbein, Lesebuch fur deutsche Schulkinder; mit Veranderungen und Zusatzen, Zum Gebrauch Nor-Amerikanischer Schulen, (Philadelphia: Carl Oist, 1795); and also his Underweisung in der Christlichen Religion nach dem Heidelberghischen Catechism...Zweyte Auflage; (Frankfurt: Julicher, n.d. (1788?) The Catechism had been found to be somewhat "heavy" for successful use with children, which had previously led to the composition of other catechisms derived from it (such as the "Bawren Catechismus" of Olevianus).
from it indiscriminantly “since they may read more than they can assimilate.”18 Instead, scripture should be learned in association with “the intelligible study of the Catechism” in order “to bring children unconsciously into the recollection of Scripture that their joy might be increased.”19 By theologizing the dialectic of Ramus and associating it with real life decisions, the Otterbeins were concerned with what the twentieth century theology has called the development of a hermeneutic — a point of contact between a given tradition and all sorts of problems arising from practical experience.

**Mysticism**

Although it is more difficult to make a firm distinction between a Mystic and a Pietist when dealing with historical figures than when explicating a typology, there are occasional instances in the writings of the Otterbeins which give evidence of mystical influence. A direct example would be Georg's description of true saving faith (as opposed to a historical faith) as that which “trusts firmly in God's promises...and remains in quiet resignation (Gelassenheit) in all God's ways.”20 This is a term that is not distinctive of Calvin nor of the authors of the Catechism. It is more akin to such South German spiritual reformers as Hans Denck (c. 1500-1527), who had preached “yieldedness” to God's will in self-surrender as the basis for the imitatio Christi. A devotional classic of the South German Mennonites, the anonymous Geistliches Lüstgärtelein, was published on the Reformed Church press at Herborn in 1787.21 In this work, which is reminiscent of Arndt's Paradiesgärtelein and Tersteegen's Geistliches Blumengärtelein, the progressive resignation of the soul is described as it proceeds through “experiences of spiritual elevation and peace as if walking through a beautiful flower garden.”22 However, the Otterbeins never carried this mystical theme to its full implication by saying that one attains the “comfort” of Question 1 by escaping...

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22. Ibid., p. 208.
one's creatureliness, in Neo-Platonic fashion. Georg also stressed the cognitive aspect of true faith saying, “That which should work upon the heart should be made intelligible to the understanding.”

Another mystically-oriented anonymous work that was known at Herborn during the Otterbeins’ day was the Wahrer Christen...geistliche Himmelsleiter (n.d.).24 The circulation of this title in Reformed circles serves as a reminder that there was an unmistakable resemblance between the seven steps of the spiritual love by the medieval Flemish mystic, Jan van Ruysbroeck, and later interpretations of the tripartite division of the Heidelberger in terms of the “Scala paradisis.”25

The New Birth: A Hallmark of Pietism

The foregoing strands of influence which contribute to the makeup of the Otterbeins are each brought into focus via their dominating interest in the “new birth” (Wiedergeburt), which even tended to supplant baptism as the chief means of identifying the priesthood of believers. The older historians were clearly astray when they asserted that the chief Pietist influence upon the Otterbeins stemmed directly from Spener and the proximity of Halle to Nassau.26 There were elements of classical Calvinism which could readily be developed in a pietistic direction, such as lay participation in congregational life, church discipline, and ascetic rigor based on the law used as a moral guide for the elect (the tertius usus), which was emphasized in the third section of the Catechism. The “earnest” practice of piety had become apparent in the Reformed tradition at least as early as Jean de Taffin (1529?-1602), William Teellink (1580-1649), and the Swiss Pietist, Christoph Stähelin, Theodorus a Brakel, and Godefridus Cornelisz Udemans. See the informative article by Dr. James Tanis entitled, “The Heidelberg Catechism in the Hands of the Calvinistic Pietists,” Reformed Review, Vol. 24, No. 3 (Spring, 1971), pp. 154-161.

25. Before the Otterbeins, the earliest Pietists who adopted this method included the Swiss Pietist, Christoph Stähelin, Theodorus a Brakel, and Godefridus Cornelisz Udemans. See the informative article by Dr. James Tanis entitled, “The Heidelberg Catechism in the Hands of the Calvinistic Pietists,” Reformed Review, Vol. 24, No. 3 (Spring, 1971), pp. 154-161.
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1649), and Godefridus Udemans (1579-1629). These men believed in a radical cleavage between the natural state and the state of grace that could be empirically evident in individuals, although the mode of explaining the new birth varied, with some (like Ames) stressing the primacy of the will and others (as Lodensteyn) emphasizing the intellect. In addition to the pervasive aura of Reformed spirituality in which the Otterbein brothers were reared, they were explicitly instructed at Herborn from the theological compend that consisted of selections from Friedrich Adolph Lampe (1683-1729) and Campequis Vittinga (1659-1722). Lampe, a highly influential Reformed theologian at Utrecht and Bremen, reworked the conventional theology of Cocceius into an experiential program of spiritual exercises—a precise structuring of the order of salvation (Heilsordnung) to be subjectively appropriated by the faithful. Lampe also drew upon the precisianism of the Voetians and the “earnest” Cocceians (de fiijen). Vittinga, an influential biblical scholar at Franeker, was associated with these “earnest” Cocceians over the humanistic wing of his followers who pursued Biblical studies as an end unto itself. For the Otterbeins, the new birth begins the process of progressive religious maturation and the process as a whole they call conversion (Bekehrung). For example, when discussing infant baptism (Qs. 69-74 of the Catechism), Georg minimizes the regenerative significance of the outward sacrament by distinguishing an outward, visible baptism from an inward, invisible one. The latter he refers to as “the inward bath of rebirth.” The completion of the faith pilgrimage in the perfection of love was regarded by the Otterbeins as a goal to be earnestly sought, although none of them gave testimony of having achieved it for themselves.

This approach followed the lead of Lampe, Stähelin, and

27. See Taffins, Des Marques des enfans de Dieu... (1586), Teellinck’s Sleuter der devotie... (1624), and Udemans’ Praezycke, dat is, werckelijke veffeninge van de christelijke hoofdt-deugten, geloove hope ende liefde (1612).

28. In 1680, the Faculty of Herborn had approved the publication of a major work by an earlier German Reformed Pietist, Wilhelm Dieterici’s Der Wahre inwendige und suszwendiige Christ.

29. In Lampe’s Milch der Wahrheit (1718), he listed the seven stages of this Heilsordnung as the call, faith, rebirth, justification, sanctification, sealing, and glorification. See O’Malley, op. cit. ch. 3.

others in structuring conversion in terms of the three sections of the *Heidelberger*: the personal recognition of sin, redemption, and thankful obedience. Georg wrote that the mode in which theology is presented in the *Catechism* is “certainly not un-psychological.” “It follows the course of the Holy Spirit, which convicts (first) of sin, righteousness, and judgment.” In reference to the second and third sections, he writes, “How beautiful it is to learn to know the order of salvation (*Heilsordnung*),....what we originally were, what we shall again become through the design of God.” To him, the “pearl” which is “true Christianity” is to learn to know “the beautiful order of salvation itself” contained within the *Catechism*. The only sure way to be reborn as a “true Christian” is to ascend this order in staiirstep fashion by the grace of God. He asked his readers, “Has the great transformation passed you by, which makes us Christians-in-deed?... This is the way the (true pilgrim) goes, and he abides therein.” And so the basis for Question 1 has been shifted from the classic Calvinistic theology of mystical union and election to one which places primary upon personal decision, efforts, and *in der Tat* Christianity.

It is evident that the Otterbeins did not require that conversion should come in an instantaneous, datable moment that would be alike in all individual cases. When the Methodist Bishop, Francis Asbury, in one of his fraternal meetings with Wilhelm Otterbein in America, asked “By what means were you brought to the gospel of God and our Savior?” Otterbein’s reply was, “By degrees was I brought to the knowledge of the truth, while I was at Lancaster.” From the time he was a child in his father’s catechetical class, he had a notional awareness that “the only comfort in life and death” is to “belong to Christ” (2.1). However, it was only as he began to spend himself in ministry that he finally internalized the threefold steps of the *Heilsordnung*. To be converted is to climb this ladder of salvation (*Himmelsleiter*) with the help of God’s grace, and none of these rungs may be overstepped. “An endless eternity depends on

these (steps)," warned Georg Otterbein.36 Personal, temporal decisions in this world are more important than eternal decrees in determining one's final outcome in the world to come.

The Enlightenment

The German Aufklärung is to be regarded as a final influence and one which impinged negatively upon the Otterbeins. It stems from the scientific, economic and socio-political revolutions which had been underway at least since the time of Copernicus37 and had reached its apex in what Carl Becker has called the "heavenly city of the eighteenth century"38 — the age of the assumed omnicompetence of national human society in which moral man tended to regard himself and not God as the maker and disposer of his historical destiny.39

The Otterbeins remained convinced that the only virtue worthy of the name was that which took seriously the inability of unredeemed man to act morally. This was the point of Georg's chief divergence from those theologians who stood in transition between historic Protestantism and the natural religion which was in vogue in his day. For example, he criticized Christian Wolff (1679-1754) of Halle not because Wolff said that piety basically consists of acting rationally, according to the nature of things, but because he failed to remember that "natural man has been lost through the fall" and he prescribed to natural man the "diet of the healthy."40 The moralists speak well of duties and obligations "but they fail to show from whence the power of practice comes."41 In short, he criticizes these men for circumventing the God-given pattern of the Hellsordnung. He urges that the word "enlightenment" be reinstated according to its traditional meaning, which was the illumination of the faithful by the Holy Spirit.

37. His epic work was published in 1543.
39. This ethos was well expressed in Rousseau's Social Contract and John Locke's Reasonableness of Christianity (1695).
40. "Vorrede" to Predigten, I, p. 8.
41. Loc. cit.
Despite this sustained polemic, each of the three brothers whose writings were available to me showed an indebtedness to this same ethos. This is indicated when Georg Otterbein begins his *Unterweisung* on the *Heidelberger* with a general discussion of “Religion” before turning to the Christian faith. There is also Otterbein’s frequent references to the *Heilsordnung* as being “clear and certain” (*klar und deutlich*) to the conscience of the enlightened speaker. They were addressing an audience that was conditioned by such terms. Thus, we find Georg informing his readers that they would find in his sermons a collection of “comprehensible truths” that are the most fundamental ones...which are worthy of the name Christian.”

### Some Significant Contacts

One measure of these brothers’ influence is evidenced by their contacts with significant religious leaders of the eighteenth century. They were of three types: Protestants who were associated with the Enlightenment, continental Pietists, and early American denominational leaders.

In the first category, Georg Otterbein’s long pastorate in the cosmopolitan center of Duisburg brought him into intimate contact with Samuel Collenbusch (1724-1803), J. C. Hasenkamp (1736-1777), and J. C. Lavater (1741-1801), who had deeply imbibed theosophical influences. These men shared the Pietists’ concern for a Biblical world view and for *praxis*, but they departed from the Reformation emphasis upon human depravity and Christ’s vicarious atonement. Their philanthropic activity included the founding of a missionary society at Barmen, in which they tried to enlist Otterbein’s support. Hasenkamp wrote to Lavater, “Otterbein is certain to become a highly important witness for the truth, but he is too cautious and needs to become bolder, if only Lavater and Pfenninger could become his colleagues.”

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44. An associate of Lavater at Duisburg.
to his conviction that we cannot discover “the secret of Christ within us”\(^{46}\) until we internalize the first step, which is the penitent’s recognition of his own sin and guilt before God.

Johann Christian Stahlschmidt, an influential German Reformed Pietist of the quietistic variety who was a colleague of Gerhard Tersteegen, made an extended trip to the hinterland of Pennsylvania in the 1750’s to visit Wilhelm Otterbein at his Reformed parish. He devoted two chapters in his published narrative, \textit{Die Pilgerreise}, to his meeting with Otterbein, noting that “Otterbein was a truly pious and kind-hearted man, and was universally esteemed for his godly life,” and so “sensing a confidence in him from his friendly deportment, I communicated my inward circumstances to him.”\(^{47}\) Here is an indication of the kind of psychological probing that Domine Otterbein found effective in his role as a curator of souls, along the path prescribed by the \textit{Heilsordnung}. During his pastorate at Berleburg, Johann Daniel Otterbein had similar dialogues with the circle of mystics who had produced the \textit{Berleburg Bible}.\(^{48}\) Although the Otterbeins were less mystically inclined than Stahlschmidt or Tersteegen, they made use of the nomenclature of inner-worldly asceticism within the doctrinal framework of the \textit{Heidelberger}. An earthly United Brethren hymnal, published in 1856, contains Tersteegen’s “Lo, God is Here!”, as well as hymns from Neander and Lampe.\(^{49}\)

Their most significant contacts were those with colonial denominational leaders. First among these was Michael Schlatter, father of the German Reformed missionary efforts in North America. He was commissioned in 1752 by the classis of Amsterdam to select six missionaries from the German Church, and Wilhelm Otterbein was among these. Wilhelm had only recently tried to set up a conventicle at his first parish near Herborn, but the people balked. His plan was to produce earnest Christians who would be nurtured by Bible study, prayer, and collegial sharing—an order which would not supplant but

\(^{48}\) \textit{Reformirtes Wochenblatt}, op cit.
\(^{49}\) \textit{Hymns for the Use of the United Brethren in Christ} (English), (Dayton: United Brethren Publishing House, 1856).
strengthen and complement the official ministry of the ordained clergy. To his dismay, the people were incensed by his youthful insistence that social rank would never suffice for true Christianity. His attack upon cold formality produced fiery trials. When the authorities were “privately solicited to arrest his preaching for a season,” his mother reputedly said to him, “Ah, Wilhelm, I expected this....this place is too narrow for you....you will find your work somewhere else....My Wilhelm will have to be a missionary; he is so frank, so open, so natural, so prophet-like.”  

And so he did when Schlatter’s appeal came to Herborn for qualified candidates to go to America.

While pastoring at Lancaster, he was himself awakened to a “conscious spiritual life,” as he later described it, and the one-time university lecturer now found that he possessed the inner resources for ministering effectively to an unlettered, disinherited people. His strategy was twofold. Within his parish at Lancaster, he began the practice of counseling each person before communion in order to exclude careless participants. His aim was to uphold Christian experience, rooted in the new birth, as the valid test for full church membership.

The second thrust of his strategy was to foray outside the confines of his frontier parish to reach those unchurched German immigrants who had been uprooted from a variety of Old World traditions. While pastoring in 1767 in the Reformed Church at York, Pennsylvania, he chanced to hear an exhortation by an unlettered but joyfully committed Christian named Martin Boehm. How different these two men were! Otterbein, the university-trained pastor, sat at the feet of the frontier lay preacher. Both had hungered for a similar awareness of grace, even though Boehm was a Mennonite, the group which had long been opposed by so many orthodox Lutheran and Reformed leaders in Europe. Otterbein, with his loyalty to church and Catechism, and with a temperament which was reserved by nature, was not ashamed of the gospel, even when it came in power. After Boehm unfolded his testimony, which so nearly paralleled Otterbein’s own experience, the Domine leaped to his

51. O'Malley, op. cit., p. 171.
feet, embraced Boehm, and exclaimed *Wir sind Brüder!* (We are brethren!) United Brethren historians have dated this contact as the origin of their evangelistic movement which was destined to emerge as one of the first native American denominations.

A final contact which shaped the activities of the American brother was Wilhelm's intimate friendship with Francis Asbury during the later decades of Otterbein's lengthy pastoral career. It was with the encouragement of Asbury that Otterbein accepted the call to the "German Evangelical Reformed Church" of Baltimore, Maryland. As the name implies, the congregation had some relation to the Coetus, the official Reformed Church body in America. However, it was distinguished by its Pietistic emphasis, which included its more rigorous standards for church membership and its commitment to the scattered Pietist societies which Otterbein had nurtured as an evangelical order within the established churches of the day. Asbury approved of those societies, although he criticized Otterbein because, by his standard, "they wanted authority and the church wants discipline."52 While in Baltimore, Otterbein assisted in the consecration of Asbury at the "Christmas Conference" of 1784 as America's first Methodist bishop. In fact, Otterbein's reputation was such that, at his death in 1813, Asbury called him "one of the best scholars and greatest divines in America."53

**An Evaluation of the Otterbein's Legacy**

Among the distinctive emphases of these brothers, and of Wilhelm in particular, was their commitment to the worldwide mission of the church. They discerned no essential difference between the roles of teacher, pastor, preacher, and counselor—each mode was to be used to bring men and women into a crisis confrontation with the drama of sin and grace and with their program of self-discipline for making the pilgrimage of faith a success. Wilhelm Otterbein was not only interested in "big meetings" (*grosse Versammlungen*) and conventicles (which

became known as class meetings) to achieve those aims. In the tenth article of the Constitution of his Baltimore congregation he states that "the church (Versammlung) is to establish and maintain a German School, as soon as possible" and that "the Vestry is to spare no effort to procure the most competent teachers."

They showed an openness to change in adapting the resources of their theological tradition to meet the existing needs of individuals. Wilhelm Otterbein had gone to a people who had fled to the New World with hopes of a new beginning but were now struggling for survival amid the threats of hostile elements, Indians, and Frenchmen. Rejecting an invitation to become pastor of the prestigious First Reformed Church of Philadelphia, he chose to remain for several years on the frontier and to respond with his considerable abilities of mind and spirit to the unexpected configurations of human need wherever they should occur.

Their ministry seems also to have been deeply influenced by a theology of history which looked upon the present age as an eschatological conflict between the Kingdoms of God and of Satan, with the fervent expectation that God’s destiny in history was becoming manifest in and through the lives of the reborn. And yet, perhaps due to his German ethnic heritage, Wilhelm Otterbein refrained from linking the Kingdom of God with American national destiny, as was the case of Puritanism. He once wrote "...one only rarely sees a true earnestness in Christianity, the kind that wrestles and fights for the kingdom of God. Everywhere there is plenty of peace, rest, and confidence....(but) you must travel this way if on that day you want to find mercy." While the ultimate goal of the pilgrim’s sojourn is a blissful eternity, Otterbein was convinced that the life lived in grateful obedience to Christ also has implications for

54. “The Constitution and Ordinances of the Evangelical Reformed Church of Baltimore, Maryland, 1785”, published in Core, op. cit., p. 112. This project did not succeed.


this world. The kingdom of God is to have a temporal manifestation as well, for “there is in prospect a more glorious state of the church than has ever been; and this we call the millenium.”

Arising from these assumptions about history is the Otterbeins’ perception of a Pietistic form of ecumenism. While they did not think in the modern terms of corporate mergers of ecclesiastical organizations, their outlook did tend to break down rigid confessional barriers. In a deep sense, the church was for them the place where the Heilsordnung is inwardly experienced and where its fruits of loving service and discipleship are manifested. Since they believed, according to their Herborn tradition, that the order of salvation which the Holy Spirit usually follows is not rigidly bound to the words and the form of the Heidelberger, they found themselves reinterpreting and representing the heart of its message as they perceived it to persons of other faith traditions. The more Wilhelm Otterbein’s conventicles grew in the New World, the more he hoped that the church was becoming one, even though he encouraged his followers to remain loyal to the historic churches to which they belonged.

57. Wilhelm Otterbein, “Letter Concerning the Millenium” (n.d.) Core, op. cit., p. 102. This citation indicates that Wilhelm Otterbein was definitely not a premillennialist.
58. The Mennonite Martin Boehm being a chief example.
59. These conventicles are referred to as “class meetings” in the Minutes of the Association of Reformed Congregations of Maryland, including Carawacks, Pennsylvania (1774-76) and their leaders are called “unsectarian” (unpartheusche) preachers in the Minutes of the United Brotherhood in Christ Jesus (Sept. 25, 1800); Core, op. cit., pp. 115-121.
60. That is, the conventicles of the reborn consisted of those who were called out of the Kingdom of Satan into the Kingdom of God. This was the fellowship of those united by the indwelling Christ Spirit which could nonetheless be outwardly identified by the marks of godly living. The Otterbeins’ concept of the communio sanctorum was thus different from that of Luther, who held that it is only faith which allows us to believe that saints are present where the notae of the church are discovered. See Luther, “On the Papacy in Rome,” Luther’s Works, Vol. 39, p. 75.
61. The evidence indicates that after 1805, when the United Brethren began assuming the shape of another denomination, Wilhelm Otterbein became noticeably less involved in the new movement. Contemporary evidence for this change is found in the Journal of Christian Newcomer, S. S. Hough, ed., (Dayton: U.B. Bd. of Administration, 1941), pp. 141, 172.
These distinctive emphases lead me to offer the following judgment. In a day when Pietism was losing its intellectual and cultural relevance, at least two of the Otterbein brothers commanded widespread attention as leaders in university and cosmopolitan centers—Georg as a pastor and influential author in Duisburg and Wilhelm as a distributor of his brother’s writings in the New World and as an influential pastor at Baltimore. The American Otterbein, more than his brothers (especially in their later years) was informed by a theology of hope and, as a forerunner of the American second Great Awakening, we find him less depressed by those Enlightenment thinkers whom his brothers regarded as apostate innovators.

There are traces of the Otterbeins’ tradition of German Reformed Pietism in the life of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ and of the Evangelical Association. We find hints of the old Heilsordnung methodology in the earliest United Brethren Confession, which was probably largely the work of Wilhelm Otterbein. For example, it affirms that the Bible “contains the true way to our souls’ well-being and salvation,” and that the sacraments are “outward signs and ordinances” which need to be confirmed in believers’ hearts. The sacramental “ordinances” came to be understood in relation to the primacy of the new birth. Hence, a variety of modes of baptism were permitted in the United Brethren tradition, and in the early “big meetings” (Grosse Versammlungen), like the one where Otterbein and Boehm met, the Lord’s Supper was placed at the end as an agape feast to be celebrated by the reborn.

This legacy was also reflected in the occasional publication of earlier Pietist works in the denominational presses. For

62. A third brother, Johann, while known for his volume on the Heidelberg Catechism, was more secluded in his pastorate at the provincial center of Berleburg, a center of sectarian ferment.

63. His brother Georg is reported to have exclaimed in his old age that after his death, there would be no one to uphold the tradition of the Heidelberger. See James Good, History of the Reformed Church of Germany, 1620-1890. (Reading: Daniel Miller, 1894).


example, Johann Jakob Rambach's *Christus in Mose* (1727) was published by the press of the Evangelical Association in 1886. Rambach was a student of Vitringa, whose exegetical meditations were studied by the Otterbeins at Herborn. He was also a chief figure overlapping Lutheran and Reformed Pietism, and thus was an appropriate devotional source for Evangelicals with Jacob Albright's Lutheran background.66 In this work, Rambach makes extensive use of the "heavenly ladder" (*Himmelsleiter*) theme which asserts that Jacob's ladder is a type of Christ whom we ascend according to the steps of the *Heilsordnung*. Georg Otterbein made use of the same theme in one of his published sermons.67

As we move from the theology of the Otterbeins to the denominational traditions which were indebted to them, there is evidence of a transition from theological adaptability to theological reductionism. Whereas the Otterbeins felt free to experiment with new and simplified catechisms in order to represent the tradition of the *Heidelberger* for a new day, most United Brethren in the nineteenth century opposed catechizing altogether, fearing that it smacked of "formal" religion. For the same reason they were at first opposed to higher education for clergy and laity,68 despite the fact that Wilhelm Otterbein was himself university-trained.

A basic strength of their theology was its elasticity—the way it assisted them in reshaping and representing an enduring faith tradition in the way stations of the eighteenth century. Thus it was that the Otterbeins' living affirmation of "true Christianity" took shape in history to become a constituent factor within the diverse phenomenon known as American Protestantism.

66. Jacob Albright (1759-1807) was a Pennsylvania farmer, tilemaker and lay preacher who became the father of the Evangelical Association. He was assisted in his own conversion by a United Brethren lay preacher named Adam Riegel.
68. The first permanent college founded by the United Brethren was Otterbein University in Westerville, Ohio (1847).