

Rev. Christian Schowalter

Bethel College Bulletin, Bethel College, Kansas. Wednesday, April 20, 1938, vol. 25, number 15.

A Memorial Biography

It was in the time of the Reformation that the lives of three brothers living in Switzerland, John, Jacob, and Christian Schowalter, were in danger. Religious persecutions were spreading. The Schowalter brothers fled from their homes and found refuge in western Germany near the peasant village of Weissenburg, Alsatia. Here the trio became tenants on the manors of Schamach and Gaisberg not far from the western bank of the stream made immortal in song and myth, the Rhine River.

One of these brothers, who went north into Germany from Scenic Switzerland, was the ancestor of Christian Schowalter, early Mennonite educator in America, pastor, mission worker, and a founder of the General Conference of Mennonite Churches.

Born at Asseheim, Bavaria, Germany

Born November 11, 1829, at Assenheim, Bavaria, Germany, young Christian Schowalter started going to public school at the age of six years. When fourteen he went to work for three years on his father's farm. Although his parents, John and Magdalena Schowalter, had but moderate means they were eager that the studious boy should go on with his education and at seventeen he enrolled at a normal school in Beugen, studied there two years, and continued his normal school training at Schiers in the canton of Graubuenden in eastern Switzerland.

Graduating at Schiers in July, 1849, he taught school for one year in Deutschhof, Bavaria. Receiving an invitation from Haysville, Ohio, to teach school there, Schowalter in 1850 in a company of seventy-two persons migrated to America.

Taught in Ohio and at Donnellson, Iowa

He taught in Ohio three years and in 1853 went to teach a parochial school at Donnellson, Iowa. Here in Donnellson, Iowa, the young school teacher became acquainted with Rosina Haffner whom he married on October 25, 1855. The pastor of the Mennonite Zion Church at Donnellson died in 1861 and that same year Schowalter was chosen pastor of this church by lot. Beginning his pastorate in December 1861 Reverend Schowalter continued in the ministry for forty-three years. He introduced the Sunday School in his church and was instrumental in interesting the young people of his congregation in music. This church was very active in supporting mission work and in 1867 when the Mennonite Mission Board arranged to send Philip Rabbit, a Cheyenne Indian from Oklahoma, to attend Bethel College the members responded generously in giving money for the Indian's school expenses.

Promoted Idea of Greater Church Unity

In 1858 a movement for greater unity among Mennonite churches was begun. Schowalter, then a school teacher, was one of the promoters of the idea. Next year when a meeting was held to outline steps for such a unification, he was chosen as secretary. He became a member of the committee that drew up the constitution for the conference, was a member of the committee that prepared the Handbook for Ministers, and president of the Foreign Mission Board from 1896 to 1902.

The question of higher education for Mennonite youth came up in conference circles and Reverend Schowalter mapped out a course of instruction and principles on which a school could be conducted. His plans met with favor and on January 2, 1868, he was induced to become principal of the Wadsworth School, Wadsworth, Ohio, and was the first man ever to head a Mennonite institution of higher learning in America. He held this position nearly two years and at the end of his principalship visited Germany with his family.

Observed Golden Wedding Anniversary

In 1905 Reverend and Mrs. Schowalter celebrated their Golden Wedding Anniversary. Failing health two years later caused Reverend Schowalter to retire from the ministry and on April 13, 1907, he passed away at the age of seventy-eight years.

Through his zeal and interest in Christian cooperation and organization, Reverend Schowalter will long be remembered as furthering a closely-knit unity among Mennonite churches that today has grown into a General Conference in North America with a membership of 156 churches.

Friends who were members of Reverend Schowalter's church at Donnellson, Iowa, attended school with him as their teacher; and who performed the marriage ceremony for them, have made a memorial gift of \$1000 to the Bethel College Memorial Fund in honor of this pioneer pastor, conference organizer, and teacher.

