

Rev. Moses A. Stewart and the Mercersburg Theology in Burkittsville, MD

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The historical record leaves us little information about Resurrection Reformed Church's sixth minister, the Rev. Moses A. Stewart. He served the congregation for eleven years, the third longest pastorate in the church's history. His pastorate also coincided with one of the church's most trying times, the closure of the church and its use as a field hospital for four and half months during the Civil War. What the record does give us is the story of his departure from the church in 1867 amid controversy. The fragments of Rev. Stewart's story allude to a significant and important figure in the history of Resurrection Reformed Church and the Town of Burkittsville, Maryland.

The first mention of Rev. Moses A. Stewart in the historical record is his admission to Marshall College in 1849.¹ Marshall College, founded in 1836 in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania by the German Reformed Church was the place of education and training for a majority of the ministers serving the Maryland Classis in the mid-19th century. The school was also the genesis of the Mercersburg Theology, a movement within the Reformed Church to embrace liturgical worship and return to sacrament-based church worship, ideas which opposing Reformed ministers saw as heretical and "Papist."² The theological movement was led by the Rev. John Nevin, who began teaching at Marshall College in 1840 and the Rev. Philip Schaff, who came to the college in 1844.³ The ideas of Rev.s Nevin and Schaff were published throughout German Reformed circles in the 1840s and by the 1850s had gained support among a faction of the denomination, causing several ministers and churches to withdraw from the Reformed Church.

Rev. Stewart's entry in the Franklin and Marshall College Alumni Book of 1903 indicates that he entered Marshall College in 1849. It also notes that he did not graduate from the school. This note may be accurate, but it is also important at this point to note the bias with which the Reformed Church would come to view Rev. Stewart. In 1867, when he concluded his pastorate at Resurrection Reformed Church in Burkittsville, Rev. Stewart converted to Catholicism, after

¹ Samuel H. Rank et al., *Catalogue of Officers and Students 1787-1903 Franklin College, 1787-1853, Marshall College, 1836-1853, Franklin and Marshall College, 1853-1903*. (Lancaster, PA: Franklin and Marshall College Alumni Association, 1903), 219.

² Mercersburg Research Fellowship. *What is the Mercersburg Theology?* 2015. <http://www.mercersburgtheology.org/what-is-the-mercersburg-theology/>

³ Ibid.

which his name was removed from denominational records. This expulsion of Rev. Stewart's name from Reformed records contributes to the difficulty in studying his life and also taints the veracity of what limited records do remain.

Regardless of whether Rev. Stewart graduated from Marshall College or not, he was certainly a student of the Mercersburg Theology and studied under Rev.s Nevin and Schaff. Later references to Rev. Stewart indicate his affinity for liturgical-styles of worship and the chief item of evidence, his conversion to Catholicism in 1867 confirms his allegiance to the Roman Church.

Another mystery surrounding Rev. Stewart's pastorate at Burkittsville is whether or not the congregation's leaders were aware of his theological leanings when they issued a call for him to assume the ministry at Resurrection Church in 1856. His lengthy term of service to Resurrection Church would indicate that the congregation did not wholly reject his theological preferences, and it may be that the church had been served by ministers before Rev. Stewart who, if not to the extent of him, held some views that aligned with the Mercersburg Theology.

Rev. George Lewis Staley, first minister of Resurrection Reformed Church after it was severed from Christ Church in Middletown in 1846 and made its own charge, graduated from Marshall College in 1845.⁴ His years as a student would have coincided with the professorships of Rev.s Nevin and Schaff and the publication of their articles which formulated the Mercersburg Theology. Rev. Staley also remained active with the college after his graduation, serving as the president of its Alumni Association in 1848 during the height of the theological debates among the Reformed Church's synod.⁵ A biography of Rev. Staley, written in 1909, a year after his death, states that he "was a strong advocate of liturgical worship and had much to do with the making of the liturgy and the order of worship which was adopted by his denomination."⁶

Following the pastorate of Rev. Staley, which ended in 1849, Resurrection Reformed Church called the Rev. Samuel Philips to assume the pulpit at Burkittsville. Rev. Philips studied at

⁴ Samuel H. Rank et al., *Catalogue of Officers and Students 1787-1903 Franklin College, 1787-1853, Marshall College, 1836-1853, Franklin and Marshall College, 1853-1903*. (Lancaster, PA: Franklin and Marshall College Alumni Association, 1903), 219.

⁵ Ibid. 134.

⁶ *Franklin and Marshall College Obituary Record Nos. 12-13 Vol. II-Parts 8-9*. (Lancaster, PA: Franklin and Marshall College Alumni Association, 1909), 222-224.

Marshall College from 1847 until his graduation in 1850.⁷ This would place him also as a student in the height of Rev.s Nevin and Schaff's development of the Mercersburg Theology, in addition to being a colleague of Rev. Stewart who entered the college in 1849. Rev. Philips served Resurrection Church from 1850-1852, leaving 4 years prior to the call of Rev. Stewart to the pulpit.

The interim period between Rev. Philip's departure and the commencement of Rev. Stewart's pastorate was filled by Rev. George Martin, another graduate of Marshall College but whose study concluded just as Rev. Nevin arrived in Mercersburg in 1841.⁸ Rev. Martin would fill the pulpit at Burkittsville twice, from 1852-1856, and again from 1884 to 1885.⁹ His first pastorate at the church in the 1850s ended with claims that the congregation had not paid him.¹⁰

Rev. Moses Stewart arrived in Burkittsville in early 1856. Among his first duties at the church was the baptism of Sarah Ellen Sontman on February 18, 1856.¹¹ The church over which he assumed leadership was a prosperous congregation. Since its organization in 1830, the congregation had experienced steady growth in relation to the expanding town of Burkittsville around it. The congregation was still worshipping alongside the Lutherans in the Union Church which had been constructed in 1829-1831, but three years into Rev. Stewart's pastorate, the Lutherans would withdraw from the property to their own new house of worship erected next to the Reformed Parsonage.

If any historical record speaks to the leadership of Rev. Stewart, the physical church building itself is a testament to his time in Burkittsville. Following the exit of the Lutherans in 1859, the Reformed Church embarked on a series of major renovations and improvements to the church building. These included the extension of the structure at the front and back by several feet, the addition of a recessed chancel, the raising of the walls and roof by several feet, new carpet and pews, possibly a pipe organ, and the addition of Greek and Gothic stylistic influences. Indeed,

⁷ Samuel H. Rank et al., *Catalogue of Officers and Students 1787-1903 Franklin College, 1787-1853, Marshall College, 1836-1853, Franklin and Marshall College, 1853-1903*. (Lancaster, PA: Franklin and Marshall College Alumni Association, 1903), 212.

⁸ Ibid. 209.

⁹ *Franklin and Marshall College Obituary Record Vol. I-No.1* (Lancaster, PA: Franklin and Marshall College Alumni Association, 1897), 7-8.

¹⁰ Rev. Guy P. Bready, *History of the Maryland Classis of the Reformed Church in the United States or The History of the Reformed Church in Maryland Since 1820* (1938), 75.

¹¹ *Record Book of the German Reformed Church, Burkittsville MD* (1856).

much of the craftsmanship admired in the Resurrection Reformed Church today dates to this rebuilding project under Rev. Stewart's pastorate. The improvements not only speak to the prosperity of the church, but also to the worship style the congregation was observing in the building. Specifically, the recessed chancel, delineating a section of the church, raised above the main level for the purposes of leading worship, and the incorporation of Gothic elements of design, pointed arches in the windows and front doors, combined to transform the old, plain brick church into a much more "churchly" edifice.

The sixth year of Rev. Stewart's pastorate at Burkittsville was marked by the destruction of war. On Sunday, September 14, 1862, the Sixth Corps of the Army of the Potomac under General William B. Franklin, numbering some 12,800 men, clashed with 2,100 Confederate soldiers under the command of Brigadier General Howell Cobb on South Mountain within a mile of the village. During the hours that the battle raged, Burkittsville's residents fled to surrounding communities as artillery rained down over the village. By the evening, the Union Army had pushed the Confederates off the west side of the mountain, taking possession of Crampton's Gap and the road leading into Pleasant Valley. By nightfall, wounded soldiers of both the north and the south were being carried into Resurrection Reformed Church. According to a 1938 history of the Maryland Reformed Churches by Rev. Guy Bready, Rev. Stewart "resigned when the Government took charge of the building, but when the congregation regained possession of the church, Stewart withdrew his resignation."¹² For four and a half months, soldiers were treated inside Resurrection Reformed Church. The pews and carpet that had been installed in the church during the renovations of 1860 were removed and piled in the churchyard. Amputations were performed on an operating table placed within the chancel of the sanctuary. The frescoed walls were splattered with blood, as were the floors of the church. Eyewitness accounts of the destruction, related in a 1907 war claims case for the church speak to the devastation that occurred. When the army relinquished the church back to the congregation on January 31, 1863, the people of Resurrection Reformed Church faced a long road to full recovery.

Rev. Stewart would lead Resurrection Church for another four years after the battles of 1862-63. He ministered to a congregation that was in the process of healing, both the physical consequences of the war and the emotional trauma of witnessing the gore and tragedy that unfolded in their house of worship. The congregation was also heavily in debt, owing money to pay for the 1860 renovations and the repairs following the use of the building as a hospital. The church was also indebted to the Lutheran's for \$600.00 to buy out their interest in the building

¹² Rev. Guy P. Bready, *History of the Maryland Classis of the Reformed Church in the United States or The History of the Reformed Church in Maryland Since 1820* (1938), 75.

and property. Rev. Stewart resigned the pastorate of the church in 1867 and joined the Catholic Church. At this point, his name disappears from the historical record. Rev. Bready states that “his name was erased from the classical roll.”¹³

The final mention of Rev. Stewart found to date is a brief article in *The Reformed Church Monthly*, appearing in 1868 in the year following his exit from the pastorate of Resurrection Church. The article states that under the leadership of the new pastor, Rev. Henry Irving Comfort, the church was “fully recovering from the sad effects of the injuries inflicted by its previous pastor, Rev. M. Stewart, whose high-churchism wrought its legitimate work in leading him to Romanism.”¹⁴ The extent of the truthfulness of this harsh statement must be considered from the biased view of the Reformed Church as a whole which was still working to reject the influence of the Mercersburg Theology. Rev. Comfort served Resurrection Church from 1867-1872, returning in 1886 and serving until his death in 1888.

The study of Rev. Moses A. Stewart’s eleven year pastorate at Resurrection Reformed Church in Burkittsville is significant to attaining an understanding of the congregation’s history during a period of great prosperity and destruction. However, Rev. Stewart’s story is also essential to understanding the context of an individual congregation within the broad and complex theological debates of an important movement in American religious history during the 19th century.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ J.H.A. Bomberger, D.D., et al., *The Reformed Church Monthly Vol. I* (1868).