

2008

Book Review: Expanding Horizons for American Lutherans: The Story of Abdel Ross Wentz

Charles Hambrick-Stowe

Follow this and additional works at: <http://cupola.gettysburg.edu/ach>

 Part of the [Christian Denominations and Sects Commons](#), [Cultural History Commons](#), [History of Religion Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Hambrick-Stowe, Charles (2008) "Book Review: Expanding Horizons for American Lutherans: The Story of Abdel Ross Wentz," *Adams County History*: Vol. 14, Article 6.

Available at: <http://cupola.gettysburg.edu/ach/vol14/iss1/6>

This open access book review is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

Book Review: Expanding Horizons for American Lutherans: The Story of Abdel Ross Wentz

Abstract

Abdel Ross Wentz (1883-1976) of the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg joked about his small physical stature but he was a giant of American Lutheranism, noted religious historian and theological educator, and exemplar of a great generation of church leaders working in national and world arenas from the 1920s through the 1950s. This biography by his son, himself a historian and seminary professor and president, traces Wentz's life from childhood in Lineboro, Maryland through his significant career in Gettysburg and much wider circles to his retirement near the Seminary campus. Obviously a labor of love and written in a style many readers will enjoy, this is far more than just a family memoir or contribution to local or institutional history. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Adams County Historical Society, ACHS, Adams County, Pennsylvania History, Lutheran, Lutheran Theological Seminary, Book Review

Frederick K. Wentz, Expanding Horizons for American Lutherans: The Story of Abdel Ross Wentz. Gettysburg, PA: Seminary Ridge Press, 2008. xiv + 191 pp. \$19.95.

Abdel Ross Wentz (1883-1976) of the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg joked about his small physical stature but he was a giant of American Lutheranism, noted religious historian and theological educator, and exemplar of a great generation of church leaders working in national and world arenas from the 1920s through the 1950s. This biography by his son, himself a historian and seminary professor and president, traces Wentz's life from childhood in Lineboro, Maryland through his significant career in Gettysburg and much wider circles to his retirement near the Seminary campus. Obviously a labor of love and written in a style many readers will enjoy, this is far more than just a family memoir or contribution to local or institutional history. Apart from the inclusion of a few stories and photos involving such homey matters as family pets, the book presents Wentz's life in the context of his ecclesial tradition and assesses his academic work in a critical-minded, scholarly fashion. The author is to be commended for achieving just the right mix of appreciative understanding and historical objectivity. Dr. Wentz's career at the Seminary spanned the years 1916-1951, from his arrival as professor of church history through his retirement as Seminary president. A graduate of both Gettysburg College and the Seminary, his keen mind and ambitious temperament led his professors to groom him as a future colleague. Sent to Germany for two years of study following Seminary graduation, he was promptly ushered into a professorship at the College upon his return in 1909. Shortly after completing his doctoral dissertation at George Washington University (*The Beginnings of the German Element in York County*) a position opened for him on the faculty of the Seminary. Even courtship and marriage to Mary Edna Kuhlman seem to have unfolded with certain inevitability. As the author states, in his formative years Abdel Ross Wentz never had to struggle with the question of next steps in his life development, his calling, or his career (p. 16). Deeply rooted in the American Lutheran tradition of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg and Samuel Simon Schmucker, Wentz focused his teaching and scholarship on the place of Lutheranism in American history and culture. In addition to his classroom responsibilities and numerous publications, Wentz was a popular and tireless conference speaker on these topics. His classic work, *The Lutheran Church in American History*, first published in 1923, appeared in updated editions in 1933 and 1955 remaining the standard history of American Lutheranism for fifty years. Other books include *History of the Gettysburg Seminary* (1926; updated 1965) and his retirement project, a biography of Schmucker (1967). A chapter on Wentz as scholar and teacher demonstrates his self-conscious embodiment of the Gettysburg tradition, viewing Lutheranism not as an Old World immigrant faith but as a dynamic, fully American expression of Christianity. We are birthright Americans, he explained, with a progressive heritage going back to

colonial days. The author fairly describes how his father's perspective failed to take full account of Midwestern and more confessional Lutheran experiences. And by the end of his career his interpretive framework seemed quaint in comparison with the scholarship of younger historians like Sydney Ahlstrom. Even as the Seminary flourished under his leadership (thwarting arguments for merger with the Philadelphia school), Wentz was somewhat confounded by changes within his own institution especially the movement toward more formal catholic liturgy, which he resisted. But the significance of Wentz's witness must not be underestimated, as he directed Lutherans toward open encounter with the world and responsible American citizenship (pp. 78-80). With this sense of mission he became a national figure, illustrated in the 1930 photo of him speaking before 15,000 Lutherans at Philadelphia's Shibe Park celebrating the 400th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession (p. 113 and the book's cover). In ever-wider circles, Wentz assumed active leadership in the United Lutheran Church in America, the American Society of Church History, the Association of Theological Schools, and ecumenical conferences. At the peak of his career he served on committees that created the Revised Standard Version of the New Testament (1946), the Lutheran World Federation (1947), and the World Council of Churches (1948). In all of these and many other settings, he was recognized as the voice of American Lutheranism. As the biography of one of its leading citizens in the twentieth century, *Expanding Horizons for America's Lutherans* is a welcome addition to the library of Adams County history. As a record of the life of a major figure in the history of Lutheranism in the United States, the book performs a valuable service to the church and academy.

Charles Hambrick-Stowe
Northern Seminary (Lombard, IL)