

Chapter 8

SCHWENKFELDERS AND THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

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As a result of many mergers, covenants, mission projects, affiliations, and neighborly activities, the United Church of Christ has incorporated many diverse groups into its history and structure. Not every group, however, that considered affiliation with the United Church of Christ (or its antecedent denominations) actually took formal action. One such group was the Schwenkfelders.

WHO ARE THE SCHWENKFELDERS?

The Schwenkfelders are descendants of the followers of Caspar Schwenckfeld von Ossig (1489-1561), a German Reformer. They came to southeastern Pennsylvania in the 1730s. Church historians have generally ignored Schwenckfeld; his contemporary, Martin Luther, gave them good reason. Luther, in one of his letters (December 6, 1543), spoke of Schwenckfeld as “the poor simpleton” who was “possessed of the devil.”⁽¹⁾ Schwenckfeld refused to retaliate and concealed Luther’s stinging correspondence among private papers, commended the burly Saxon’s virtues, and named him in prayer to his dying day.

Schwenckfeld’s gracious conduct was partly a reflection of his home life. He was of Silesian nobility, raised in a devout Roman Catholic home, and educated for diplomatic service, which ended at age twenty-nine, when he lost his hearing (court secrets were not shouted). At the same time Schwenckfeld began to read the writings coming from Wittenberg and Luther and experienced a spiritual awakening. His full attention was given to mastering Hebrew and Greek, studying the scriptures and early church writing, and for eight years, affirming many of Luther’s views.

Separation came when the Silesian nobleman discussed the meaning of the Lord’s Supper with Dr. Luther and tried to reconcile conflicting interpretations. Agreement was impossible. In despair Schwenckfeld declared that he could not approach the Lord’s Supper as long as Christians were divided and announced he would abstain from communing until the differences were resolved. This decision, called the *Stillstand*, was initiated in 1526. Schwenckfeld also questioned the practice of infant baptism but shunned the Anabaptists’ insistence of rebaptizing adults, as well as their literal use of the scriptures. To him, the Bible was not a “paper pope” but mere words that required God’s Spirit to bring them to life.

At first, Schwenckfeld’s company was solicited by the well-to-do and intellectuals, but pressure from both Roman Catholics and Protestants prompted King Ferdinand of Silesia to banish

Schwenckfeld from his estate. Living in exile, he depended on friends, who circulated his writings and provided him refuge until his death, on December 10, 1561.

Because Schwenckfeld remained a bachelor, his followers were all “spiritual heirs” who were attracted to his reforming spirit of “The Middle Way,” between literal biblicism and blind sacramentalism. During his life and after his death those who adhered to his expression of the Christian faith existed without any formal organization. Some attended the recognized churches (Roman Catholic and Lutheran), others refused; some communed, others abstained. They met in private homes for worship and study and visited churches where pastors were willing to honor Schwenckfeld's writings until the 1540s, when the ruling prince ordered strict adherence to the *Augsburg Confession*. Schwenckfelders who did not comply were tried, exiled, imprisoned, sent to Vienna as galley slaves, or pressed into service as soldiers against the Turks. A common preference of the 1580s was Vienna, where the Roman Catholics were judged to be less severe than the Lutherans in Silesia! Hence the Schwenckfelders' strong dislike for Lutherans!

Waves of persecution threatened the Schwenckfelders with extinction throughout the 1600s, until 1719, when a Jesuit mission initiated another approach. Representatives of the Schwenckfelders were requested to travel to Vienna to defend their Schwenckfeldian views in writing. (2) The defenses were futile, and by 1726 only one alternative remained: leave everything and escape. Those who did sought refuge in Saxony with Count Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf, leader of the Moravians, but that stay was only temporary. On July 29, 1734, forty families began the journey to Pennsylvania and a new chapter in their history. (3)

SETTLEMENT IN AMERICA

The *Saint Andrew* landed at Philadelphia on September 22, 1734. On the twenty-fourth a daylong thanksgiving service was held, beginning a practice called *Gedaechtnisz Tag*, which is the oldest ongoing thanksgiving observance in America. Because no land grant was large enough to provide the Schwenckfelders with a site similar to the Moravian tract at Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, each family started its homestead, ranging from Chestnut Hill, near Philadelphia, into what are now Berks and Lehigh counties. The first thirty years were a time to establish farms and mills; after that, attention was given to organizing their unstructured house fellowships into a Society of Schwenckfelders, in 1782.

Families grouped into an Upper District and a Middle District. In the late 1700s and early 1800s, worship in the home began changing to meetinghouse services, with three in the Upper District (Washington, Hosensack, Kraussdale) - today's Palm Church - and three in the Middle District (Salford, Towamencin, Worcester) - today's Central Church. In the beginning, services were held at each location on one Sunday in three, so that it was one congregation rotating to three locations.

In 1763 a catechism was prepared by Christopher Schultz. He prepared the Schwenckfelders to adapt to the totally different life in America, where those who had been their persecutors in Europe were now their neighbors and friends. In a new climate the Schwenckfelders began a new era.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH GERMAN REFORMED

In southeastern Pennsylvania the Schwenkfelders naturally formed some relationships with other German colonists. By the early nineteenth century close ties had developed between Schwenkfelder pastors in the Upper District and members of the New Goshenhoppen Reformed Church (now United Church of Christ, in East Greenville, Pennsylvania). The Rev. C.Z. Weiser described this kinship in the *Mercersburg Review*. He wrote about similarities between Christopher Schultz's catechism, based on Schwenckfeld's works, and the Heidelberg Catechism of the Reformed Church in the United States; each corresponded to the other "in reference to the classification of the Ten Commandments, and embodied the essentials of the Reformed Confession, if we except (meaning: exclude) the doctrine of Infant Baptism."⁽⁴⁾ However, an incident occurred that proved differences were greater than similarities. Weiser's article related the sad discovery as he told about the Schwenkfelder pastor, Christopher Schultz Jr., who was invited to supply a vacant Reformed church in the early 1830s. The unbaptized, unordained pastor created a controversy among the parishioners that also disturbed his conscience. The Schwenkfelder catechism did not forbid the outward practice of baptism, confirmation, communion, and ordination; at the same time his position was to follow a church life in which these rites were excluded.

He consulted with neighboring Pastors ... who advised him to bring Ordination and the Sacraments across the waters, at the hands of their forerunners in Silesia or Saxony. "So mote it be!"—said Pastor Schultz. But alas!—the few who remained back were precisely in the same dilemma. now commenced Pastor Schultz's inward conflict. There was no way open to bring an Apostolic succession over to the Schwenkfelder Society. . . A midnight melancholy possessed his soul. he became an inmate of the Lunatic Asylum, and died under the cloud in 1841.⁽⁵⁾

Weiser identified the crisis as the absence of an ordained ministry among the Schwenkfelders, for their pastors were chosen by lot from the congregation. in 1895 the crisis was addressed, as Schwenkfelders in both districts decided to practice adult baptism by sprinkling and the Lord's Supper (at first served with a common cup and later changed to communion in the pews).⁽⁶⁾ The study papers and committee reports that preceded this decision are an agonizing account of working out a response for neighbors who unrelentingly asked the Schwenkfelders, "If you are christians, why do you not baptize and commune?" To this day some Schwenkfelders claim that the decision was accommodation; others claim that it was an overdue resolution. Regardless of any evaluation of the decision, it was a dramatic example of how the New World created a climate that gave new direction to Schwenkfeldian beliefs and practices. After 1895 and the end of the *Stillstand*, and 1909, when the Society of Schwenkfelders was incorporated into the Schwenkfelder Church, a loose house fellowship from sixteenth-century Silesia became a protestant denomination. it was the smallest denomination in the world, numbering five churches - all in southeastern Pennsylvania - with a total membership of 3,000.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE CONGREGATIONALISTS

In the late nineteenth century the Schwenckfelders developed an important relationship to Congregationalism around the long-standing desire to collect all the writings of their society: the *Corpus Schwenckfeldianorum*. It began as a search through Europe for extant works of Schwenckfeld and concluded with the publication of nineteen volumes. In the monumental task two names familiar to Congregationalists emerged: Chester David Hartranft and Hartford Theological Seminary.

Hartranft's contact with the Schwenckfelders is like a maze, beginning with Augustus C. Thompson, an 1838 graduate of Hartford's predecessor school, the Theological Institute of Connecticut. Thompson continued his studies at the University of Berlin, where his roommate was August F.H. Schneider. Schneider became interested in the Schwenckfelders through church historian Gottfried Arnold. To help Schneider in his studies, Thompson had his brother in the United States contact the Schwenckfelders in Pennsylvania. That contact helped to initiate a thirty-five-year project in which Schneider assembled copious notes about Schwenckfeld and the Schwenckfelders.

Forty years after those student days in Germany the Schneider collection was placed on the market. Through the generosity of Newton Case, the volumes were purchased for Hartford Seminary's library. Thompson, then a trustee of the seminary, happened to recognize the handwriting of his former roommate and enthusiastically introduced the material to Prof. Chester D. Hartranft—a providential preparation.(7)

Hartranft's biographical sketch included such details as the following: born in Pennsylvania's Montgomery County on October 15, 1839; graduated from Philadelphia's Central High School; studied at Rambo's School in Trappe, the Hill School in Pottstown, the University of Pennsylvania; served briefly in the military; graduated from the Reformed Theological Seminary at New Brunswick; served as a (Dutch) Reformed pastor for twelve years and then accepted a professorship at Hartford Theological Seminary. The missing detail was his genealogy; he was a descendant of the 1734 Schwenckfelder immigrant, Tobias Hartranft, and a distant cousin of Pennsylvania governor Maj. Gen. John Frederick Hartranft. The Schwenckfelders were also unaware of the relationship; the professor's name was missing from the 1879 Genealogical Record. The omission was quickly corrected when a committee began looking for a prominent speaker for the one hundred fiftieth anniversary (1884) of the landing of the Schwenckfelders and realized that the Hartford Seminary professor would be an excellent choice. The invitation was accepted, and Hartranft began to probe a genealogical detail that dominated the rest of his life.

Hartranft was not content to give an anniversary address; his vision was to secure a place for Schwenckfeld in Reformation scholarship. The *Corpus* would be the means. It sounded like a reasonable undertaking, which the Schwenckfelders endorsed, and the Hartranft family left for Europe on a leave of absence that was called an "experimental year."

After a short search of libraries and archives Hartranft compiled a bibliography of more than nine hundred documents. The mass of material was overwhelming; the results of the year were not encouraging, and advance subscriptions for an as-yet-unpublished sixteen volumes were

meager. Hartranft volunteered to resign his position at Hartford to devote four years to publishing the works plus a fifth year of writing a biography of Schwenckfeld. The proposal was a threat to the seminary's future; two professors had just resigned to go to other schools, a third had died, and student enrollment was uncertain. The solution was for the seminary to draft Hartranft as its president, giving him time to complete the assignment for the Schwenckfelders. The arrangement proved to be physically devastating.

Sixteen years later not a single volume was in print. The seminary trustees received an appeal from the Schwenckfelders, reminding them of Hartranft's commitment to their project. Again, an arrangement was made; the trustees scheduled Hartranft's retirement for 1903 and made him president emeritus at half salary for life - a generous contribution to the Schwenckfelders - along with counsel donated by the seminary faculty, whose urging to Hartranft was "to confine the manuscript format within practicable bounds."⁽⁸⁾ A difficult concession for a church historian like Hartranft! At his death, on December 30, 1914, only four volumes were in print, with no end in sight. It was not until 1961 that the project was completed by Elmer E.S. Johnson and Selina Gerhard Schultz with the publication of the nineteenth volume.

Through those anxious, disappointing years, when Hartranft literally poured his life into the *Corpus* project, there were other, more pleasant associations. One of these was the friendship of a colleague in the research in Europe and on the seminary faculty, Elmer E.S. Johnson. Another was an association with Oscar S. Kriebel, Schwenckfelder pastor at Palm Church and founding headmaster of Perkiomen School, in Pennsburg, Pennsylvania. Because of his admiration for Hartranft, Kriebel considered Hartford for his seminary education but chose Oberlin, where he had gone to college and met his future wife. But Kriebel was attracted to another part of Hartranft's life, his denomination: the Congregational Churches.

Kriebel was interested in introducing the Schwenckfelders to wider associations with other churches and denominations. Beginning in August 1922 the young people of the Congregational Christian Churches of the Middle Atlantic District (Pennsylvania; New Jersey; Maryland; Washington, DC; and Virginia) met each summer for ten days at Perkiomen School. The group worshiped in Palm Church during their two-Sunday stay, and one of their clergy preached at both services. The September 1927 issue of the Schwenckfelders' bimonthly magazine, *The Schwenckfeldian*, printed a full report by the Rev. Harry Myers, pastor of Philadelphia's Pilgrim Congregational Church. His assessment of the conference was that "the friendly relationship between the Schwenckfelders and the Congregationalists in the foreign field is now being carried forward in the home land in a very happy way.

Kriebel must have shared that impression and acted to turn it into a more tangible relationship. At the annual meeting of Palm Church in April 1929 he addressed the congregation on the subject of merger with the Congregational Churches. The minutes contain no details, but members who recall being there report that a motion was defeated by a hand or standing vote, with no count being noted. The reasons for the motion's defeat are a mix of interesting explanations. One reason given by a member who cast a negative vote was that the Congregational preacher at the previous summer conference insisted, while preaching, that a Schwenckfelder mother carry out her crying baby. Some "no" votes were a protest to his request.

Another explanation attributes the motion's defeat to one of Kriebel's relatives, Howard W. Kriebel, who agitated for negative votes to get back at "Dr. O.S." for some unknown reason, because "they were always at each other, and this was one of those times."(9)

Congregationalists and Schwenkfelders can trace other, pleasant associations of the twentieth century. Some of these associations came through the pastors, such as Johnson and Kriebel, who ended the Schwenkfelder practice of being chosen by lot. From their time on the ministers were college and seminary trained, and the institutions attended included Hartford, Oberlin, and Union Seminary in New York.

In the early twentieth century, when the Schwenkfelder churches changed from German to English in their worship services, the resources that were used were not translated but new ones were written. In 1928 the Schwenkfelders published a *Book of Worship for Church and Home*, borrowing from Congregational, Reformed, and Presbyterian material "in the spirit of Denominational Fellowship which is becoming more and more marked in these days" (the committee's comment in the preface). For their hymnal they chose the 1935 edition of the *Pilgrim Hymnal*, which Palm Church later updated to the 1958 edition. And in 1909, when the churches were incorporated, the polity adopted was congregational.

MISSION WORK

The question of involvement in missions was raised at the 1844 fall meeting of the Schwenkfelders. An offering of \$273 was received and sent to Benjamin Schneider, a German Reformed missionary who was serving under the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) in Brusa, Asia Minor. Why was Schneider selected to receive the offering? He had been a neighbor from Long Swamp Reformed Church; the Schwenkfelders of the Upper District knew him personally. Again, in 1865, the German Reformed Missionary Society was used as a channel for directing Schwenkfelder Harvest Home offerings to the Pennsylvania Bible Society.(10)

By the 1894 Fall Conference, interest in missions resulted in a committee to investigate a venture in home missions in Philadelphia. On December 24, 1895, a charter was granted, establishing the Schwenkfelder Board of Home and Foreign Missions. Harvey K. Heebner, a Schwenkfelder, became the fulltime pastor on his being graduated from Union Seminary in New York, in June 1906. Until that time the mission was supplied by these neighbors:

May 1899—October 1900

The Rev. A. N. Stubblebine of the Reformed Church

March 1901—August 1902

The Rev. H. A. Bomberger of the Reformed Church (acting pastor)

September - 1902—June 1904

The Rev. Elmer E. S. Johnson of the Schwenkfelder Church

July 1904—October 1905

Harvey K. Heebner, Stated Supply

January 1906—May 1906

The Rev. David W. Ebbert, D.D., of the Reformed Church (acting pastor)(11)

Other mission starts followed in Norristown (1904) and Lansdale (1916).

The Board's first mission business was to channel a three-year gift of \$300, beginning in 1900, to Armenians in Tarsus and Iconium. Then the Board received a request it could not handle. Harvey Heebner's sister, Flora Krauss Heebner, was about to graduate from Oberlin College (1903). The Philadelphia mission looked forward to her being their parish visitor, working with her brother-pastor, but Flora felt her place was elsewhere - in China. Assistance was needed for her to answer her calling. Because the Schwenkfelders did not have contacts in China, application was made to the ABCFM. Flora was accepted and sailed from Philadelphia on August 17, 1904, to begin what totaled thirty-eight years of service.(12) Her intention to go to China established a tie with the ABCFM that continues to this day through the United Church Board for World Ministries. Several missionaries who were aided by Schwenkfelder congregations are "adopted" from World Board personnel so that Schwenkfelders may be involved in global ministries.

THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

In 1959 the Palm Church was vacant. At Lancaster Theological Seminary a married couple with a Schwenkfelder name - Kriebel - were about to graduate. They were doing research on the Schwenkfelders, and so a call was extended. The couple wanted to remain in their denomination, the United Church of Christ. Again, as in the case of Hartford Seminary, an arrangement was made. The couple would be ordained and maintain their standing in the United Church of Christ and the Palm Church would vote to become an associate member of the UCC conference. The vote was favorable, and in June 1959 Howard and Martha Kriebel became pastors of the congregation that O. S. Kriebel had served and tried to bring into a similar relationship a generation earlier.

The action of the Palm congregation was followed by the Central, Lansdale, and Norristown churches when they called UCC ministers to become their pastors.(13) In 1964 Jack R. Rothenberger, whose family is listed in the Genealogical Record and who was ordained a Schwenkfelder minister in 1955 after graduating from Hartford Seminary, was granted standing in the United Church of Christ, where he was already active in association and conference committees.

The early 1960s were filled with ministerial conversations about the similarities between the two denominations. With historical references as an incentive, the pastors made a bold proposal: "Why not affiliate with the United Church of Christ?" At the May 20, 1961, General Conference a motion activated "the appointment of a study committee to determine the thinking of the people on the question of the future of the Schwenkfelder Churches. And to make specific recommendations to General Conference at Spring 1962 Meeting."(14) The General Conference

Moderator appointed a Special Committee to Consider the Future of the Schwenkfelder Church, with each church being represented by the pastor and at least one layperson. The Committee met over the next three years and worked out a schedule: Articles appeared in *The Schwenkfeldian*; a traveling panel visited each church school; Rothenberger, whose 1962 master's thesis was "Caspar Schwenckfeld Von Ossig and the Ecumenical Ideal," delivered a sermon in each church; and special programs were planned for the annual thanksgiving day and General Conferences. The Committee also evaluated resources describing the Mennonite, Church of the Brethren, American Baptist, and UCC denominations, noting differences and similarities to the Schwenkfelder Churches. The overall impression was that the United Church of Christ was

very unusual; not one denomination but several joined together. . . . Its name implies its members are ecumenically minded. Its background is one in which Schwenkfelders have participated on a number of occasions. Its organization is not overbearing or complex, . . . its constitution guarantees that others who work with it will not be absorbed or indoctrinated or restricted.(15)

A motion from the Committee urged delegates at the 1963 Spring General Conference to engage in study, with each church coming to its own decision. By February 24, 1964, the Committee had its responses:

Central—There appears to be a growing concern about the future of our churches. A small vociferous group seems to be against what our committee has done and is doing all in their power to discredit the committee. Seems to be a confusion on the meaning of words, such as: merger-affiliation. Apparent fear on the part of some that the committee has made final decision for all the people.

Norristown—A "Future of the Schwenkfelders" committee has been appointed... . Appears to be growing concern about the problem.

Philadelphia—The congregation is still open to ideas and has not yet made up its congregational mind about the matter.

Lansdale—There is little apparent strong opinion being voiced in either direction. Frustration was expressed over the fact that many people have made up their minds before having read *The Schwenkfeldion*. (This "frustration" seems to be present in each of the churches.)

Palm—No strong opinions have been heard. . . . Affiliated for five years and many people are not aware of it. We have benefited, without paying for the benefits. Majority of people seem indifferent. A few negative voices have been raised.(16)

The Committee's next step was to give each church a study packet, to "allow the Holy Spirit to direct us toward the future," and to ask the May 16, 1964, Spring General Conference to vote to disband the committee. The motion was affirmed, and "the committee was discharged with a vote of thanks."

Almost twenty years later the papers summarizing the ecumenical vision of Schwenckfeld and friendly relations with the United Church of Christ and its predecessor denominations are assigned to forgotten files. The Central Church, comprising almost one half the membership of the Schwenkfelder Churches, voted in 1964 to table a motion when its supporters saw that it was about to be defeated; Palm Church's 1959 action remains on the record, as do Lansdale's and Norristown's. Some members of the Lansdale Church, however, believe that if a vote were taken today, the affiliate status might be overturned. Philadelphia is now a mission congregation to its black neighborhood, funded by the Schwenkfelder Mission Board - a return to its original status. In the 1960s all the active Schwenkfelder pastors had standing in the UCC's associations. In the early 1980s four of the eight pastors are associated with the United Church of Christ. Of the five Schwenkfelders who have entered the ministry in the past twenty years, two are serving as UCC pastors.

In 1870 the Rev. C.Z. Weiser, the Reformed pastor neighbor to Schwenkfelders in the Upper District, now Palm Church, remarked, "As a Society, they will not merge with any other denomination.(17) The special committee of the early 1960s was not thinking merger but affiliation, and that thought was resisted. Perhaps the resistance was owing to the committee's failure to recognize another New World pursuit of the Schwenkfelders: an interest in self-identity. After 1734 a Schwenkfelder was not so much a spiritual heir of Reformer Caspar Schwenckfeld as a bloodline descendant of the Schwenkfelders who came to colonial Pennsylvania on the Saint Andrew. Genealogy became a primary concern, an interest that was threatened by the committee of 1961-64. Often a positive response to affiliation is the result of stressing a group's strengths, not its weaknesses, needs, and deficiencies. The committee could not communicate to the Schwenkfelder Churches that there was a compelling reason for affiliation - to share the spiritual gifts received from Caspar Schwenckfeld von Ossig.

When UCC members visit a Schwenkfelder church today they discover a quiet blending of the four denominations represented in the merger of 1957 - a secret hidden in the history and life of Pennsylvania's Schwenkfelders.

Notes

1. For literature on the life and teachings of Caspar Schwenckfeld von Ossig and information about the Schwenkfelders, contact the Schwenkfelder Library, One Seminary Avenue, Pennsburg, PA 18073.
2. The value of the defense was that a clear statement of Schwenkfeldian beliefs was put into print in the 1720s, and later published in English as Elmer Schultz Gerhard, ed., *A Vindication of Caspar Schwenckfeld von Ossig* (Norristown, PA: Board of Publication of the Schwenkfelder Church, 1942).
3. Other ships brought Schwenkfelder families to Philadelphia during the 1730s, but this was the largest number of immigrants.
4. C. Z. Weiser, "Caspar Schwenckfeld and the Schwenkfelders," *Mercersburg Review*, July 1870:362.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 363.
6. For a detailed account of this decision, see Martha B. Kriebel,

Schwenkfelders and the Sacraments (Pennsburg, PA: Board of Publication of the Schwenkfelder Church, 1968).

7. This incident is reported by W. Kyrel Meschter in the draft of a book to be published by The Board of Publication of the Schwenkfelder Church in 1984, p. 32.
8. Ibid., p. 36.
9. Quoted from a conversation that Elva S. Schultz had during the 1960s with the pastor of Palm Schwenkfelder Church, the Rev. Martha B. Kriebel.
10. Selina G. Schultz, "Schwenckfelder Interest in Missions," *The Schwenckfeldian* 1, no. 6[September 1947]: 7—9.
11. Samuel K. Brecht, "Supplementary History—The First Schwenkfelder Church of Philadelphia," *The Genealogical Record of the Schwenkfelder Families* (Pennsburg, PA: Board of Publication of the Schwenkfelder Church, 1923).
12. Selina Schultz, op. cit., p. 11.
13. The UCC pastors who were called were as follows: Central: William B. Bradshaw, Eric T. Braund; Norristown: Ronald Lockhart, David R. Crowle, Herbert H. Dewees; Lansdale: William E. Cameron, Larry O. Bechol, Andrew H. Johanson, Arlan M. Bond.
14. At the May 19, 1962, General Conference the Committee reported meeting twice, but "we are not prepared at this time to make specific recommendations to General Conference."
15. Quoted from "Which Way?" a pamphlet prepared by Martha B. Kriebel for the special committee.
16. Minutes, Special Committee, February 24, 1964.
17. Weiser, op. cit., p. 370.