

Henkel, David ^[1]

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Henkel, David

by Robert C. Carpenter, 1988

4 May 1795–15 June 1831

David Henkel, theologian, [Lutheran](#) ^[2]minister, and founder of the Tennessee Synod, was the son of the [Reverend Paul](#) ^[3]and Elizabeth Negeley Henkel. Apparently his family had tutored him because he exhibited early intellectual prowess, showing a good understanding of both the English and German languages; before his career ended, he also learned Greek and Hebrew. Henkel began his ministry in South Carolina on 4 Oct. 1812 at age seventeen. During the next year, the Lutheran Synod of North Carolina approved him as a catechist to serve several rural churches in [Lincoln County](#) ^[4] (including present [Gaston](#) ^[5], Lincoln, [Catawba](#) ^[6], and part of [Cleveland](#) ^[7]counties), which became his lifetime home and parish. In October 1815 he became a ministerial candidate.

In the years that followed, the fiery Henkel formulated questionable doctrines and often went against the grain of North Carolina Lutheranism. After a visit to his father, who lived in New Market, Va., Henkel expected to be ordained, but in October 1816 the North Carolina Synod denied his request. As a result, Henkel's Lincoln County churches caused some "bitterness" in the synod. In 1817, after he had visited his brother, the Reverend Philip Henkel, in Tennessee, the synod again failed to ordain him. On 20 Oct. 1818 [Gottlieb Shober](#) ^[8], the Moravian-turned-Lutheran who was a leader in the synod, tongue-lashed Henkel for objectionable doctrines and "bad rumors."

As the year 1819 approached, conflict seemed imminent. Early correspondence before the synod indicated that Henkel and his allies and Shober and his allies anticipated a showdown. Although the synod's constitution provided for its annual meeting to be held on Trinity Sunday, Shober decided to meet earlier to allow the synod to select delegates to a General Synod meeting in Pennsylvania. On 26 Apr. 1819, the North Carolina Synod convened at Buffalo Creek in [Cabarrus County](#) ^[9]. Henkel was present, but his father, brother Philip, and associate, Joseph E. Bell, stayed away "in defiance." After the absent ministers were verbally attacked, the synod held an inquiry into charges against David Henkel. Certain Presbyterians and other denominational members were among Henkel's accusers. Andrew Hoyle, a Presbyterian minister, charged that Henkel had tried to defame his reputation. Others accused him of lying, of teaching doctrines foreign to Lutheranism, and of excommunicating a certain person illegally. The latter accusation was shown to be well founded, and the charges concerning Hoyle were proved by the convention. During his "trial," Henkel had no counsel and could not cross-examine witnesses. At its conclusion, the synod revoked his candidacy status and put him on probation as a catechist for six months. Henkel, who denied all the charges, "promised to do better." Nevertheless, Shober and the synod later accused him of perpetrating the division that followed this meeting.

On 6 June 1819 Henkel and his associates attended the regularly scheduled synod meeting at Buffalo Church; they considered the April meeting to be unconstitutional. The next day Philip Henkel ordained his brother David and Joseph E. Bell as Lutheran ministers with all powers and responsibilities of the office. The service was held under an oak tree because the church doors were locked. The dispute had approached the breaking point.

Although some of the complaints against Henkel were reasonable and his firebrand sermons could have been considered objectionable by other denominations, other charges relating to doctrine were made by persons ignorant of his profound theology. Yet, his disagreement with the Reverend Mr. Hoyle appeared to be personal, not theological. Shober, in addition, desired the repudiation of Henkel and his vigorous teachings. In a letter of 6 Nov. 1819, Shober thanked Hoyle for his assistance in disposing of Henkel.

Henkel's parishes responded by writing petitions vindicating their spiritual leader. The 1819 synod minutes indicate that he far exceeded his fellow ministers in the performance of his duties. In one year he had baptized 377 children (about three times as many as his associates), 49 adults, and 38 slaves (only one other minister had baptized any slaves), and he had confirmed 135 young people. Bell urged Henkel not to break with the synod, and apparently he agreed to attempt a reconciliation at the next synod meeting.

The causes of the controversy were threefold. First and primarily, Henkel, Shober, and others had personality conflicts. Second, Henkel and his allies opposed the General Synod, whereas Shober and [Carl Storch](#) ^[10], synod president, favored sending delegates. Finally, the two groups had doctrinal differences.

On 29 May 1820, the seventeenth annual North Carolina Synod Convention was held at Emmanuel Church in Lincolnton.

Henkel, his father, his brother Philip, and Joseph Bell all attended. During the morning session, synod leaders debated the status of David Henkel. Shober and Storch considered Henkel's ordination to be illegal, whereas Henkel contended that the synod had departed from proper Lutheran practice, failing to adhere to the Augsburg Confession and the synod constitution. After lengthy and violent argument, the synod adjourned until the afternoon. Because the Henkels had been repudiated, they did not attend the afternoon session. However, Henkel sent two members of his churches with instructions. They argued that, because the synod had ratified Bell's "oak tree" ordination, it should also recognize Henkel's. They also presented a letter by Henkel indicating that he would rejoin the synod if it promised to abide by its constitution. But the synod refused to compromise.

With the schism complete, the Henkel faction met during 17–19 July 1820 to organize the Tennessee Synod. Although unable to attend this first meeting, David Henkel became the leader and spokesman of the new synod. On 22 Oct. 1821, he attended the second convention of the Tennessee Synod and was elected secretary. At this time, he had baptized 444 infants, 56 adults, and 69 slaves, and confirmed 156 persons.

Meanwhile, charges and countercharges between the two synods persisted. On 26 Apr. 1822, Henkel wrote a conciliatory letter to the North Carolina Lutheran Synod in which he suggested that the opposing groups meet to determine who was at fault in the controversy, and to restore peace and unity for the good of the Christian church. The North Carolina leaders, at their own convention, replied "that D. Henkel is no minister of the Lutheran Church." This response ended any hopes for reconciliation, and the two synods went their separate ways.

Henkel continued to lead the Tennessee Synod for the rest of his short life. During his ministry he delivered 3,200 sermons, baptized 2,997 infants and 243 adults, and confirmed 1,105 persons. He also made two missionary journeys into Kentucky and Indiana, and he was the author of numerous pamphlets and essays. His most outstanding writings included "The Essence of the Christian Religion, and Reflections on Futurity" (1817), "The Carolinian Herald of Liberty, Religious and Political" (1821), "Objections to the Constitution of the General Synod" (1821), "The Heavenly Flood of Regeneration, or Treatise on Holy Baptism" (1822), "[An Answer to Joseph Moore](#)^[11]" (1825), "The Tennessee Synod Constitution" (1828), "A Translation from the German of Luther's Smaller Catechism, with Preliminary Observations by the Translator" (1829), "An Essay on Regeneration" (1830), and "A Treatise on the Person and Incarnation of Jesus Christ, in which some of the principal Arguments of the Unitarians are examined" (1831). In addition, Henkel wrote a number of essays concerning the synodical break, such as "Plain Truth, Vindicated," "Reasons shewn why this debate with the North Carolina Synod was proposed," and "Reasons" why the 1819 North Carolina Convention was unconstitutional.

On 17 May 1814 Henkel married Catharine Hoyle, daughter of the Honorable Peter, state legislator and political leader, and Elizabeth Carpenter Hoyle. They were the parents of Susan (m. Philip Benick), Elizabeth (m. Henry Ingold), the Reverend Polycarp C. (m. Rebecca Fox), the Reverend Socrates (m. Elenora Henkel), Cicero (m. Elenora Little), Flora (m. Laban Fox), and Elenora (m. Peter Little).

After an illness of about a year, Henkel died at his home in Lincoln County at age thirty-six. He was buried at St. Johns Lutheran Cemetery, now in [Catawba County](#)^[6]. A likeness of him is among the Charles L. Coon Papers at Duke University.

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[Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, University of North Carolina Press.](#) ^[27]

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