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How have the major Lutheran churches in Europe defected from the Lutheran Confessions? And what does the future hold for European Christianity at present?

EUROPE: DEFECTION FROM THE CONFSSIONAL BASE AND NEW SIGNS OF ITS VITALITY

by Darius Petkunas

EUROPE DIFFERS FROM OTHER CONTINENTS in that it bears a very special relationship to the Lutheran Reformation. It was in Europe that the Lutheran Reformation was born, and it was from Europe that it spread to other continents. However, the Lutheran Church in this continent is very different from the Lutheran Church in the days of the Reformation. One may in fact declare that modern Europe seems to have almost completely lost its connection with the Reformation. Europe has become secularized and the Lutheran churches in Europe have in general lost their connection with the confessional treasures they had been permitted to deliver to so many generations. While the churches still claim to hold to the Scriptures and the central truths of the Reformation, the Lutheran Confessions no longer play any role as standard and norm of teaching and life in many of these churches. This defection has opened the door to all sorts of heterodoxy, as is clearly observable today. It is the intention of this address to delve into the question of how it has happened that the major Lutheran churches in Europe have defected from the classical Lutheran Confessions and also to offer some observations concerning the present European situation, putting primary attention on the territorial churches (*Landeskirchen*) — churches that have traditionally claimed an absolute majority of the people of the land as their members.

As Richard John Neuhaus, a social critic once prominent within the Lutheran Church, wisely stated: “Once orthodoxy is made optional, it is sooner or later excluded.”

introduced no novelties in doctrine or ceremony but had steadfastly maintained the ancient faith, casting aside only what had been introduced contrary to the Word of God. That a church is confessional is a clear statement that the unity of that church is not built upon earthly orders, foundations and structures but upon the clear confession of the apostolic faith, as set down in accordance to words of the inspired prophets and apostles and Christ Himself and set down in the Church’s Creeds and Confessions.

Accordingly, the Word of God is understood to be the definitive norm of all that is believed, taught and confessed in the Church (*norma normans*) and the Lutheran Confessions are confessed to be the clear statement of that norm of faith, confession and teaching (*norma normata*). The confession of the Church intends to articulate unchanging truth. Although these Confessions were articulated in particular times

and places, the Lutheran Church declares that its confessional statements are neither time nor place conditioned. They are unchangeable and non-negotiable and in this the Lutheran Church differs from every other Protestant Church. The Reformed and Anglican Churches also have confessional documents, but they understand their Confessions to be time conditioned historical documents that represent the position taken by the church at a particular time and in a particular situation.

Throughout the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries, Lutheran churches sought to remain united and firm in their common faith, confession and teaching. They understood their Reformation truth to be firmly established and on this basis it was possible for them to recognize each other as sister churches and allow altar and pulpit fellowship. There appears to have been no instances of closed

1. Adherence to the confessional norms in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries

Both in the preface to the Augsburg Confession and again in the words introducing the second part of that document, the confessors clearly stated that their churches had

Communion between Lutheran churches, which would bar faithful Lutherans from receiving the Sacrament from Lutheran altars.

2. Defection from the norms in the eighteenth century

Clear defections from norms set by the Lutheran Confessions became evident in the second half of the eighteenth century with the rise of Enlightenment Rationalism. Even though the Halle-type Pietism of August Hermann Francke had introduced new and strange teachings that separated regeneration from Holy Baptism — a clear departure from the Church’s doctrinal norm — the Pietists still claimed to be adhering to the Lutheran Confessions. The Rationalists who followed them could make no such claims. Their departures from the Church’s norms were both comprehensive and thoroughgoing. They treated the Scriptures as human documents, questioned the doctrinal norms derived from them and introduced higher biblical criticism in academic circles. Before the end of the eighteenth century, many Lutheran ecclesiastical leaders and academicians in Europe had become adherents of the Enlightenment Rationalism and its dependence on human reason alone.

Weakened by Pietism and deprived of its objective norms by Rationalism, the Church was not able to defend her doctrinal positions. In some Lutheran territories, it was from secular governments rather than church leaders that the strongest reaction against Rationalism and heterodoxies were sounded. Examples of this include Wöllner’s Edict of 1788 in Prussia and similar *ukase* issued in the Russian Empire by Tsar Alexander I in 1819.

Only in Russia was the Church successfully returned to its scriptural and confessional norms. The tsar made it clear to the Lutherans in his empire that they were an immigrant people, whose lawful existence as a church depended upon their faithful adherence to their Church’s Confessions. As a result of his declaration, the faculty of theology at the University of Dorpat was cleansed and its liberal, rationalist professors were retired. Dorpat would soon become the premier Lutheran confessional faculty in Europe. Critics refer to it as “ultra-confessional.”

In the Prussian Church, the largest Lutheran Church

in Europe, the outcome of attempts by the government in the closing decades of the eighteenth century to re-establish Lutheran confessional norms were unsuccessful. The reaction against the censorship of religious literature was strong and the purging of the Lutheran faculties of theology was derided as governmental oppression. Those who implemented these programs were called “Protestant inquisitors.” Even the eminent Professor Immanuel Kant came under close scrutiny when his fourth critique of reason, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, was published. He was officially reprimanded and chose to resign his position in the University of Königsberg.

Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm III devised his own program to meet the challenge of Enlightenment Rationalism. He planned to revitalize Christianity by introducing new liturgies, the first of which appeared in 1816. He

envisioned the adoption of a united Agenda and liturgy in both Lutheran and Reformed Churches. To his mind, the union of the Lutheran and Reformed Churches and the adoption of his Prussian Union liturgy were inseparably linked together. He thought that beautiful liturgy rather than the confessional norms would defeat Rationalism and revitalize the church. The efforts of Wöllner and his 1788 decree to restore confessional integrity were cast aside

and replaced by the imposition of a Church Union inaugurated on the 300th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation in 1817.

3. The reemergence of confessionalism in Germany

Confessionalism, however, was not dead. In soon reemerged primarily as a reaction against the Prussian Union and similar union efforts in other German lands. Strong negative reactions to the Prussian Union appeared first of all in Prussia itself under the leadership of Professor Johann Gottfried Scheibel in the city of Breslau in Silesia. It was here that, for what appears to be the first time, the policy of closed Communion was introduced, dividing Lutherans in the Union Church from Lutheran confessionalists who soon came to be called “Old Lutherans.” They understood that the Union Church had separated itself from pure Lutheran doctrine, and this made fellowship together with it impossible. Henceforth,

Lutheran altars would be closed to members of the Union Church. The Old Lutherans pledged themselves to remain faithful to the Church's Confessions even when faced with imprisonment.

Within the Union Church as well, some Lutherans came to a new appreciation of their confessional heritage and initiated an attempt to re-establish the Lutheran Church as *de jure* church body in Prussia. However, King Friedrich Wilhelm IV strictly forbid this, stating that it was not his intention to destroy his father's Union. Lutheran confessionalism survived in the Prussian Church only as an undercurrent, in a Church which had largely become estranged from its confessional heritage. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, this confessional resurgence had almost completely dissipated.

It is not clear to what extent confessionalism was able to re-establish itself in other Lutheran territorial churches in Germany. One can speak with some certainty about the Bavarian Church, which had earlier established a union but soon rejected it on confessional grounds. This Bavarian church became more than ever determined to adhere to its confessional position. It is also clear that the Hanoverian Church was able to maintain its confessional integrity. To the chagrin of the king of Prussia, the Hanoverians expressed no interest in joining the Prussian Union when Hanover was annexed to Prussia in 1866.

4. The decline of confessionalism in the closing years of the nineteenth century

The resurgence of Lutheran confessionalism waned once again by the end of the nineteenth century. Theological education was in the hands of university academic faculties in which the voice of the Church was less clear and less distinct. This signaled the return of theological liberalism as a potent force. Now the battleground in Prussia shifted from a battle between confessionalists and unionists to the struggle between conservatives and liberals. An example of this can be seen in the inability of the leaders

of the Prussian Union Church to make any clear and definite statements in support of a literal acceptance of the Apostles' Creed in all its statements over against Adolf Harnack's vague interpretation of the creed and its significance for the Church. The ancient norms receded into the background and the doors were opened to heterodoxy. In fact the heterodox now proudly proclaimed that they

were a group to be reckoned with in the Prussian Church and should be regarded as a legitimate faction in the Church alongside the Lutherans and the Reformed. The same tendencies could also be seen to have been at work in Scandinavia, the second major Lutheran area in Europe. In fact, Lutheranism in Europe might well be termed German and Scandinavian Lutheranism, since it was only in these regions that whole local populations had accepted the Lutheran Reformation and territorial churches had been established.

5. The struggle between Lutheran conservatism and liberalism in the twentieth century

Confessionalism was not sufficiently strong to become a potent force in the territorial churches in the twentieth century. Instead, Lutheran territorial churches moved steadily into the camp of theological liberalism. What tension has remained has

been the tension between theological conservatives and liberals. However, theological conservatism has lacked a single cohesive and definitive norm, such as the Confessions would provide, and for that reason it has gradually declined.

Lutheran churches in Germany faced a uniquely perilous situation from the Third Reich. In the 1930s, the Nazi government sought to take complete control of the Lutheran, Reformed and Union churches and make them instruments for the spread of its national socialist ideology. This strategy became evident in the state-supported *Deutsche Christen* movement. The Prussian Union Church and other union churches which had lost their confessional grounding were highly susceptible to the inroads of this movement. In the parish council

The Church is called to be faithful and to abide in hope. One should recall that half a century ago it appeared that the organized Christian Church had been completely eradicated in the Soviet Union, and the Soviets declared that within a few decades Christianity would be altogether a thing of the past. Today confessional Lutheran churches have re-emerged in what was formerly Soviet territory.

elections in 1933 the *Deutsche Christen* swept into control of all the Lutheran churches, excepting only in Bavaria, Württemberg and Hanover. Reaction against the *Deutsche Christen* within the German territorial churches led to the creation of the *Bekennende Kirche*, the confessing church. This movement, however, made no reference to the restoration of the Lutheran Confessions. It was instead concerned only with the preservation of what it termed the essentials of the Christian faith, as agreed to in the Barmen Declaration by the Lutheran, Reformed and Union Church representatives who formulated the declaration.

A further defection from the doctrinal norms of the Lutheran Confessions can be seen in the decision of the European Lutheran churches to ordain women to the Holy Ministry, first in Germany and later in Scandinavia and in other smaller European Lutheran churches. The decision was seen by many to be simply a socio-political matter that recognized the rights of women to hold high office in the Church. This was perhaps a most clear sign of defection from the Lutheran Confessions and the Word of God. It indicated that the Confessions no longer played any decisive role in the doctrine and life of major European Lutheran churches and that the Scriptures could be interpreted to support any one of a number of positions which one chose to assert. In the wake of this decision astonishing new positions have been taken by major Western European Lutheran churches concerning human sexuality, marriage and reproduction. Indeed the decision to ordain women brought with it an earthshaking change in those churches that had traditionally claimed to be heirs of the Lutheran Reformation.

6. The present-day situation in Europe

In the closing years of the twentieth century and the opening decades of the twenty-first century, one sees almost complete submergence of conservatism in the mainline churches and at the same time a resurgence of Lutheran confessionalism. The German and Scandinavian territorial churches have surrendered to the forces of liberalism, and there appears to be for them no way back to the Confessions. The single exception to this is the case of the former territorial Church in Latvia, which since the early 1990s has ceased to ordain women and has sought

to establish and maintain a confessional stance in doctrine and practice.

In Eastern Europe, confessionalism is emerging in those Lutheran churches, which had been isolated from the West during the Soviet era. A sign of this is the clear rejection in these churches of calls to ordain women and the rejection of liberal statements concerning marriage, sexuality and abortion. Also elsewhere in Europe one can see the emergence of small Lutheran bodies, which seek to be faithful to the Confessions, some of which are now completely independent from their national churches and others of which still seek some accommodation with the national churches in their lands, while at the same time striving to establish and maintain confession integrity. One is reminded of the Lutheran associations,

which sought to maintain themselves within the structure of the Prussian Union Church in the nineteenth century.

The year 2017 will mark the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation. Reformation jubilees have more than once given rise to alarming surprises. At the first

centenary the Lutheran Hohenzollern family of Brandenburg-Prussia announced its conversion to Calvinism. Beginning at that time the electors and kings began their relentless efforts to estrange Lutherans from their confessional identity, even forbidding theological students to attend the University of Wittenberg, stating that it was unacceptable on theological grounds. They interfered in the internal life of the Lutheran Church and even banned subscription to the Formula of Concord. The second centenary saw the beginning of state-supported Pietism in Prussia. Elsewhere, the advocates of Pietism met with strong resistance in the churches, but in Prussia Pietism was established and granted legal status by King Friedrich Wilhelm I. The third centenary brought with it the inauguration of the Prussian Union and forced marriage of the Lutheran and Reformed Churches. As Hermann Sasse once noted, such was the spirit in German lands in those jubilee days that other Lutheran churches would have gladly established ecclesiastical unions as well, but could not do so because there were simply not enough Reformed in their areas to do so.

Now the fifth centenary lies just ahead. Lutherans a hundred years ago could hardly envision the situation of the Lutheran Church in Europe today. No one could have

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imagined the changes in the Holy Ministry and in a host of ethical issues, which are now considered so normal that those who speak out against them on biblical grounds face summary discipline for doing so. All previous promises concerning respect for consciences were soon rescinded. As Richard John Neuhaus, a social critic once prominent within the Lutheran Church, wisely stated: “Once orthodoxy is made optional, it is sooner or later excluded.”

Concerning the future of confessional Lutheranism in Europe one cannot speak with certainty. It has known hard times, but it has never altogether disappeared. The Church is called to be faithful and to abide in hope. One should recall that half a century ago it appeared that the organized Christian Church had been completely eradicated in the Soviet Union, and the Soviets declared that within a few decades Christianity would be altogether a thing of the past. Today confessional Lutheran churches have re-emerged in what was formerly Soviet territory. Indeed, adherence to the Lutheran Confessions is essential to the Church at all times and at all places. To abandon them or ignore them is to court heterodoxy and its potent challenges to the truth of the biblical message upon which the Lutheran Reformation has been built.

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