

For the

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The What and Why of Lutheranism

By the Rev. Lawrence R. Rast Jr.

Lutheranism in America is like a bowl of alphabet soup: ELCA, LCMS, WELS, ELS, and others. A glance at the 2001 *Lutheran Annual* (p. 432) reveals 12 different Lutheran synods in the United States. While that may seem like a lot, if we glance at the 1924-26 *Lutheran World Almanac*, we find that there were no less than nineteen different groups of Lutherans at that time. Beyond that, however, no less than 58 distinct Lutheran synods were formed between 1830 and 1875 (See E. Clifford Nelson, ed., *The Lutherans in North America*, rev. ed. [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981], 175). That raises several questions. Why were and are there so many different Lutherans and why aren't we in fellowship?

Why all of these Lutherans?

In part it stems from how one views the work of Martin Luther and the nature of the Reformation. Historically, one group, later labeled "orthodoxy," focused on doctrine and believed that the Reformation was a conservative movement. They believed that Luther had preserved the Bible's clear teaching on Christ's atoning work, justification by grace, and the application of Christ's benefits in the means of grace. Therefore, they focused on what Luther retained from the historic church. Preservation of pure doctrine became the rallying cry of this group.

Another grouping, later broadly referred to as Pietism, saw Luther as a radical reformer whose main teaching was freedom from the institutional church. Freedom to change became this

group's trademark. Some leaders within Pietism believed that Luther had made a good beginning, but hadn't gone far enough in his reforms. Therefore, it was the task of the church to reform itself continually, even if that meant changing some of its beliefs to fit the time and place in which it existed.

Obviously there would be some conflict between these two opposing viewpoints—was Luther a conservative or radical reformer? This conflict is at the heart of what divides American Lutherans. Which was the true Luther? The one who claimed that the Bible clearly states its doctrines and that these are true for all time; or the one who advocated the principle of the freedom of the individual? The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) has, from its founding, clearly held to the first of these options. A significant portion of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) has its roots in the second. Within both traditions, however, there are individuals and congregations more comfortable with the other body's perspective! Hence the tangle of the present day. History can help us unravel the knot.

The first Lutherans to enter the American colonies were the Dutch and Swedes in the mid-1600s. They settled along the Hudson and Delaware Rivers respectively. Lutheran pastors were few and far between in those days. It was not until Henry Melchior Muhlenberg arrived in Philadelphia, Penn., from Germany in 1742 that the Lutherans began to organize themselves. Muhlenberg is called the Patriarch of American Lutheranism on account of his efforts in forming the Pennsylvania Ministerium in 1748, the first Lutheran synod in the American colonies.

Muhlenberg's heirs diminished the place of the Lutheran Confessions. Synods like the New York Ministerium, the North Carolina Synod, and the Virginia Synod clearly identified themselves with the

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Pietist camp—and increasingly they lost their Lutheran identity. By the time the General Synod was formed in 1820 (the first national Lutheran synod), there was little left to distinguish Lutherans from the other American denominations (Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, etc.).

Leadership among Lutherans eventually fell to Samuel Simon Schmucker. Schmucker advocated union with other Protestant traditions and downplayed theological differences. He was also a proponent of what were called the “New Measures.” These measures, which were made famous by the revivalist Charles Finney, included the use of revivals and the “anxious bench.” The anxious bench was used by revivalists to set apart those who had been awakened to sin, but had not yet repented and come to faith. It was placed in the front of the congregation as a place to make a “decision” for Christ. It is the root of today’s “altar call.” For Finney, Jesus did not pay the price for human sin (he rejected original sin, after all); Jesus was simply an example for us to follow. Being a Christian meant deciding to follow Jesus. Schmucker adapted Finney’s new measures and theology for Lutheran use. He rejected baptismal regeneration, arguing that baptism is

One of the distinguishing characteristics of the LCMS was its unconditional subscription to the *Book of Concord* (also called the Lutheran Confessions or Symbols), in its entirety *quia* (“because”) it is a faithful exposition of Scripture. Missouri insisted that what the Confessions taught was true because it was based on Scripture.

simply a public profession (or decision) for Christ, not a means of grace. The Lord’s Supper, he argued, was just a memorial meal in which we remember what Jesus did a long time ago—it neither gives forgiveness nor is Jesus really present. He even went so far as to change those parts of the Lutheran Confessions that put forth these teachings! In 1860, a colleague of Schmucker’s would write: “Revolutions do not go backwards; the Reformation of the 16th century was emphatically a revolution in the sentiments and dogmas of Christendom, and you will never turn the church back into that night of barbarism and spiritual bondage out of which she emerged at the Reformation, while the Holy Spirit makes men free with the liberty of Christ” (cited in C. F. W. Walther, “Fidelity to the Written Word: The Burden of the Missouri Synod,” *Concordia Journal* 1 [March 1975]: 69-70). Here we see a clear statement of radical Lutheranism. So influential were these views that, in 1840, the vast majority of so-called Lutherans were Lutheran in name only, certainly not in substance or style.

Towards the middle of the nineteenth century, however, Lutheranism began to recover its confessional heritage and move away from the revivalism of the General Synod. This was largely due to the impact of the newly-formed Missouri Synod. But weren’t there “Lutheran” churches already in America? Of course they were in name, but theologically geared the preaching of the Word toward emotional excitement and emptied the sacraments of their gracious character. In response to the confused Lutheranism of

the times, C. F. W. Walther helped to organize the German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States on April 26, 1847. The Missouri Synod grew to be the largest of the conservative Lutheran Churches in the United States.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of the LCMS was its unconditional subscription to the *Book of Concord* (also called the Lutheran Confessions or Symbols), in its entirety *quia* (“because”) it is a faithful exposition of Scripture. Schmucker and other “American Lutherans” subscribed only to a portion of the Augsburg Confession *quatenus* (“in so far as”) it agreed with Scripture. That left them free to adapt, modify, and even change the doctrinal content of the Lutheran Confessions. Missouri, on the other hand, insisted that what the Confessions taught was true because it was based on Scripture. Walther put it this way: “The purpose for which the Church demands a subscription to its Symbols is twofold: a) that the Church may convince itself that its teachers really possess the orthodox understanding of Scripture and the same pure, unadulterated faith as the Church; b) that the Church may bind them with a solemn promise to teach this faith pure and unadulterated or renounce the office of teaching instead of disturbing the Church with their false teaching” (C. F. W. Walther, “Why Should Our Pastors, Teachers and Professors Subscribe Unconditionally to the Symbolical Writings of Our Church,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 18 [April 1847]: 241-53). Anything less than a full *quia* subscription allows for teachers to teach mere opinion at the expense of the Word of God.

What had gone wrong with Lutheranism, according to Walther? He answers: “We do not deny that later, with the relentless intrusion of pietism, and still later with the coming of moralism and rationalism and resultant unionism all doctrinal discipline gradually came to a halt and even turned against pure Lutheran teaching. Certainly no one will call this ‘the best time of our church.’ It was much more the time of its worst corruption, and to a great extent continues as such” (Walther, “Fidelity,” 79-80).

The General Synod, which placed itself in the pietist stream, reacted violently to the founding of the Missouri Synod. They believed that the LCMS was hopelessly out of date and referred to them as “Old Lutherans.” Further, they charged the LCMS with arrogance. The editor of the General Synod’s paper, the *Lutheran Observer*, stated: “They are a class of spiritual Ishmaelites; their appropriate place is in the Church of Rome” because “they can find or see Christ nowhere but in the sacraments.” Despite the level rhetoric, Walther and Missouri stood firm. As Walther put it: “Let the *Lutheran Observer* and its kindred spirits therefore pass its poisonous judgment on our determination to adhere to orthodox church fellowship and to flee from the fellowship of manifestly false teachers, who want to remove even grace from the means of grace. Their attack will make no impression on us, nor on all true Lutherans who hold a faith that affects not only the mouth and the head but the very heart. We stand as Luther did when he heard of the raving and roaring of the Swiss against him a

month before his death . . . (Walther, “Fidelity,” 69, 73).

However, over time the Missouri Synod was also affected by its culture and context and things slowly changed. Missouri began to display within itself the two views of the Reformation mentioned above. After World War II, a new openness to reinterpret Synod’s fellowship position and a willingness to view the Scriptures in novel ways began to appear. In September 1945, a document appeared, entitled “A Statement,” which was signed by 44 prominent members of the Synod. They decried Missouri’s harsh exclusivism and arrogant doctrinaire character. Though the “Forty-four” withdrew the statement, they never recanted its position. The practical result was that two divergent positions tried to live side by side in the Synod. At the St. Louis seminary, some professors began to modify Synod’s position on the inerrancy and authority of Scripture. Students were taught that the Bible only *contains* the Word of God, not that it *is* God’s Word. The obvious conclusion, then, was that the Scripture has errors and could not be trusted entirely. All this stemmed from a new (for Missouri) understanding of Luther—no longer was he portrayed as the faithful confessor of the received faith, but a budding radical who freed human beings from institutional coercion. One professor, capturing concisely the radical position, wrote: “Yes, anarchy is what I propose” (Robert J. Hoyer, “On Second Thought,” *The Cresset* 32 [November 1968]: 17). Another stated: “Jesus must have looked like a ‘liberal,’ quite careless of law and discipline” (Paul G. Bretscher, “The Log in Your Own Eye,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 43 [November 1972]: 645).

Historic Missouri and the newer “moderates” were poised for a showdown. Controversy exploded in the Synod, centering on what was being taught at the St. Louis seminary. Its president and several professors were dismissed and they, along with most of the students at St. Louis, formed Concordia Seminary in Exile—*Seminex* (1974). But the controversy would soon touch the other branches of Lutheranism in America. Many of those who supported *Seminex* left the LCMS and helped form the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC) in 1976. The AELC tempered its confessional commitment, seeing the Confessions as merely historical documents that articulated the church’s past position. It allowed the Scripture’s inerrancy to be challenged, and supported the ordination of women. It was, further, a vocal advocate for Lutheran unity, and strove to incorporate as many of the nation’s Lutherans into a single body as possible.

On January 1, 1988, the AELC, the American Lutheran Church (founded in 1960), and the Lutheran Church in America (founded in 1962, a successor body of the General Synod) merged to form the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). In August of 1997, the ELCA entered into pulpit and altar fellowship with a number of Reformed bodies, compromising its Lutheran identity: the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Reformed Church in America, and the United Church of Christ. Fellowship with the Episcopalians and Moravians has been declared, and talks with

the Roman Catholics, and United Methodist Church continue. Fellowship with churches of confessions that compromise the clear doctrine of justification compromises the ELCA’s claim to be confessionally Lutheran. For, as was the case with Schmucker, there is really no observable difference any longer.

The LCMS was founded on the principle that the Bible and the Lutheran Confessions do, in fact, speak the truth—and that its position is consistent with these witnesses. Again Walther writes: “Years ago, when *Der Lutheraner* (*The Lutheran*) was first published, as well as in more recent years, when this theological journal appeared (*Lehre und Wehre, Doctrine and Defense*), complaints were made against our periodicals and against the doctrinal position and discipline of our Synod. We were accused of having drawn the boundary lines for orthodox teaching and church fellowship too strictly. Such charges did not disturb or confuse us at that time. On the contrary, we nourished the hope that those who had pledged themselves to the Word of God as ‘the only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and teachers should be judged’ would soon change their minds and realize that members and servants of the orthodox church could not do otherwise” (Walther, “Fidelity,” 69). The ELCA, on the other hand, typically sees Luther as a guide—one who coined the principle of freedom. The question is one of unchanging truth (conservatism) versus theological relativism (radicalism). Until that theological gap is bridged, disunity will be

the reality for American Lutheranism. Even within Missouri there is tension on this point. In recent years, the LCMS uncritically opened itself up to the influences of Pietism and Evangelicalism in the theology of the Church Growth Movement and its practice of “contemporary worship.” The question confronting the Missouri Synod is whether it will hold to its historic course, or simply become just another relativized form of Christianity—one that finds it difficult to say “this is the truth.” Missouri faces internal challenges that can only be resolved by its congregations and pastors taking seriously their *quia* subscription to the *Book of Concord*. Walther’s conclusion to “Why Should Our Pastors and Teachers Subscribe Unconditionally?” applies as much today as it did in 1858: “The *only* help for resurrecting our Church lies in a renewed acceptance of its old orthodox confessions and in a renewed unconditional subscription in its Symbols” (Walther, “Subscribe,” 253, emphasis added).

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