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In Response to Bengt Hägglund: Luther and Melanchthon in America

C. George Fry

It has always struck me as strangely appropriate that the Protestant Reformation and the discovery of America occurred simultaneously. When Martin Luther was nine, Christopher Columbus landed in the Bahamas; in 1519, while he debated Dr. John Eck at Leipzig, a fellow-subject of Emperor Charles V, Hernando Cortez, began the conquest of Mexico. Philip Melanchthon, the "Great Confessor," was composing the *Augustana* at about the time Francisco Pizarro was occupying the Inca Empire in Peru. By the time of Melanchthon's death in 1560, the Americas had been opened up to European settlement.

A related theme of equal interest is that of the American discovery of the Reformation. Or, more properly, the recovery by Lutherans in the United States of the history and theology of the Reformers.

How have the twins — Luther and Melanchthon — fared in the New World? (For they are twins; one cannot imagine the one without the other.) Their value, like that of gold, has fluctuated enormously! In part, that is because the Lutheran Churches in America have been of such varied backgrounds and have been subjected to a variety of foreign influences. But, more importantly, both Luther and Melanchthon are extremely complex personalities and comprehensive theologians. They are both capable of a great number of interpretations. Their religious richness is due to the nature of the faith they fostered; for classic Lutheranism, as Charles Porterfield Krauth noted, felt itself

. . . Reformed, as against all corruptions; Protestant, as against the assertion of all false principles in Christian faith, life, and church government; Evangelical, as against legalism and rationalism, against all restricted atonement and arbitrary limitations of God's love; and through a historical necessity, created not by herself but by her enemies, she is Lutheran, over against all perversions, mutilations, and misunderstandings of the Word under whatever name they may come, though that name be Reformed, Protestant, Evangelical, Catholic, or Christian.¹

To be a Lutheran, Krauth contended, was to be truly Reformed, Protestant, Evangelical, Catholic, and Christian. To keep these complementary elements of the Lutheran heritage in harmony was not easy for the American interpreters of Luther and

Melanchthon. At times, as with Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, the Pietist Patriarch, the Reformed influence predominated; later, with Frederick Henry Quitman, president of the New York Ministerium, the Protestant tendency prevailed, almost to the point of Unitarianism, as evidenced in his rationalist catechism; with Charles Porterfield Krauth the Catholic Tradition was pivotal, perhaps as an over-compensation for the Reformed and Protestant influences which he experienced in his youth. In the twentieth century, in the case of Dr. Franklin Clark Fry, the "Christian" or Disciple motif was central in the ecumenical quest for unity which took priority in Lutheran thinking. But perhaps it has been the representation of Luther and Melanchthon as Evangelicals that has been the most challenging and persisting problem for American Lutherans. The interpretation of these men as Reformers, or Protestants, or Catholics, or even as Ecumenical Churchmen, is not nearly as fraught with problems as their roles as the fathers, not only of Lutheranism, but of Evangelicalism. For that reason, let us consider Martin Luther and Philip Melanchthon as they were understood in the early nineteenth century in English-language Lutheranism as pioneers of Evangelicalism.

Dr. Richard F. Lovelace, Professor of Church History at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, has recently written a major book on spirituality in Protestantism. It is entitled *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*.² In this work Lovelace contends that "the Evangelical movement has the deepest historical roots of any contemporary renewal movement" in America.³ As a matter of fact, the origins of Evangelicalism go back not only to English Puritanism and German Pietism, in his opinion, but to the Continental Reformation itself as expounded by the Saxon and Swiss leaders. For that reason Luther and Melanchthon are regarded as the Patriarchs of American Evangelicalism. As "live orthodoxy," Evangelicalism, in opposition to "dead orthodoxy," or Confessionalism, supposedly bears the real mantle of the Reformation prophets. Lovelace is persuaded that this was the consensus of American Christians at the start of the last century. In America, between the War of 1812 and the Civil War, there was an "Evangelical Consensus" — a gathering of Protestants around the "Core Convictions" of the Reformation. This Evangelicalism was a protest against the Rationalism of the French Revolution and the growth of Roman Catholicism in America (through immigration). Lovelace believes that this Evangelical Consensus, which he regards as "the mainstream of American Protestantism," broke up into various "components" after the Civil War —

due to sectionalism (Northern and Southern churches), slavery and racialism (black and white churches), confessionalism (a return to “dead orthodoxy” by some Lutheran and Reformed groups), ritualism (the Anglo-Catholic movement in the Episcopal church, drawing that fellowship away from Evangelicalism), and theological controversies (with the rise of Liberalism and Fundamentalism). From 1865 until the 1960’s, American Evangelicalism was divided — and became a minority movement in America. What he envisions in the present moment is a re-creation of the Evangelical Consensus, as Evangelicals rapidly resume their role as the “mainline expression of American Protestantism.”

Whether this prophecy of Lovelace is valid, I do not know. His interpretation of history has merits. It certainly is true that English-speaking Lutherans in the nineteenth century did attempt to become part of a major Evangelical Consensus — a movement that dominated their conduct between 1820, with the forming of a General Synod (its constitution was ratified in 1821), and the deterioration of that body due to the rise of sectionalism (the secession of Southern members in 1863) and confessionalism (the creation of the General Council in 1867). The three leaders in the General Synod, who also shared a common evangelicalism with their Protestant neighbors, were Samuel Simon Schmucker, Benjamin Kurtz, and Samuel Sprecher.

Let us consider each and then review their program for Lutheran Evangelicalism (in opposition to Evangelical Lutheranism):

(1.) Samuel Simon Schmucker (1799-1873), the most famous Lutheran of his generation, was himself the son of a pastor. He received his education at the University of Pennsylvania and then Princeton Theological Seminary. While a student he had a vision of Lutheranism reborn after the dismal days of Rationalism and Deism through participation in two kinds of Evangelicalism — (a) the New Evangelicalism coming out of Europe in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars, which stressed a return to the convictions of the Reformation and (b) the New Evangelicalism coming out of America in the wake of the Westward movement, the Revivalism that was sweeping both the Eastern seaboard (under men as Timothy Dwight at Yale) and the Trans-Appalachian West (in the Methodist, Baptist, and Disciples movements). As a pivotal figure in the new General Synod, as professor at Lutheranism’s first seminary (Gettysburg) for over forty years, and as a prolific writer, Schmucker was in a position to advocate Lutheran Evangelicalism.

(2.) Benjamin Kurtz (1795-1865) was a very influential Lutheran. In 1820 he became president of the General Synod. He was also a member of the seminary committee, paving the way for the founding of Gettysburg. He was also active in getting the American Lutheran churches involved in missions. For years he was on the Board of Directors of Gettysburg Seminary and represented that agency and his denomination in Europe. But perhaps his most important role was as an editor — for he produced *The Lutheran Observer*, a very widely read organ. Kurtz was definitely of the Evangelical persuasion. Like Schmucker, he reacted strongly against the Deism that had so decimated main-line American Protestantism. For him the only alternative to an American church dominated by either Unitarianism⁴ or Roman Catholicism⁵ was a turn to Evangelicalism. To him Luther and Melanchthon were archetypal Evangelicals, sharing a similar situation, caught between the Humanism of Erasmus and the Romanism of the Pope. Kurtz, therefore, advocated Revivalism, or “American Lutheranism,” or “New Measures,” or “Melanchthonian Lutheranism,” a Lutheran Evangelicalism that was radically ethical, experiential, and practical.

(3.) Samuel Sprecher, born in Maryland in 1810, was the third member of the triumvirate. Schmucker had been his teacher, and upon his graduation from Gettysburg Sprecher served as a pastor in Pennsylvania. From 1849 until 1884 he served as President of Wittenburg College (now University) in Ohio, an institution which he felt would present the real Luther and the real Melanchthon to the Great American West. But his greatest influence was not as a pastor or administrator, but as a teacher and author. *The Groundwork of a System of Evangelical Lutheran Theology* became one of the most influential statements of “American Lutheranism.” Though it is said that at the time of his death in 1906, at the age of ninety-five, he had repudiated his earlier position, that did not undo its impact.

Schmucker, Kurtz, and Sprecher shared a common vision of a Lutheranism that was both thoroughly national (or cultural, or American) and yet totally original (in the sense of a new understanding of the European sources). Such a Lutheranism, they felt, would be not only part of American Evangelicalism, but could even become its nucleus. Such a Lutheranism would be confessional (not through a return to the Book of Concord, but through the composition of an American Confession), non-liturgical, and evangelistic. In this respect they were also profoundly ecumenical, regarding Lutheranism’s destiny as that of uniting Evangelical Protestantism.

These men, I believe, were taken by surprise when with ease they overcame Unitarianism, Deism, and Rationalism, but were confronted by Lutheran Confessionalism. The contention of Rationalists such as Dr. Quitman, President of the New York Ministerium, that they really represented Luther never did ring quite true. But the appearance of Confessional Lutheranism in America in the 1840's was another matter. This Confessionalism in part was a survival from Colonial times; in part it was due to a revival of historical and systematical theology on the behalf of English-speaking Lutherans; in part it was the result of the Lutheran Awakening in Germany and the immigration to the United States of confessional groups that formed such synods as Buffalo, Missouri, Iowa, and Wisconsin. For this challenge the Lutheran Evangelicals were not prepared.

What was the real issue at stake between the American and the Confessional Lutherans in the 1840's? The problem has been much beclouded, but certainly one of the roots of the controversy was that of historical interpretation — just how is one supposed to understand Luther and Melancthon? Are they to be regarded basically as Evangelical or as Catholic? At least that is the way the Eastern English-language Lutherans began to perceive the question. To men such as Schmucker, Kurtz, and Sprecher, Confessionalism was a capitulation to Catholicism. They feared greatly. For what profit had they won, if having saved America from Deism and Unitarianism, now their own immigrant brothers from Europe would surrender it to Romanism? Confessionalism, to the Old Lutherans, was a way to guarantee the balance of the Evangelical and Catholic ingredients in the Lutheran mix. To the New Lutherans, it was a calculated plot to subvert the Reformation and return Lutheranism to Rome.

Viewed from such a perspective, we can better understand a document circulated by Drs. Schmucker, Kurtz, and Sprecher. It was named the *Definite Synodical Platform*. Released in September 1855, it was mailed anonymously to the ministers of the General Synod. The thrust of this work was its effort to create an "American Recension of the Augsburg Confession." Here the line of direction becomes quite clear — the elimination of vestigial Catholicism from Lutheranism. Thus, the authors desired to eliminate all approbation of ceremonies of the Mass (and the term itself) in Article 24 of the Augustana; the teaching of baptismal regeneration in Article 2; the assertion in Article 8 of the validity of a sacrament in spite of the character of the officiant; and the teaching in Article 9 that grace is received through Baptism. The authors of the *Platform* advocated the total removal

of Article 11, with its retention of private confession, and the revision of Article 10 concerning the nature of Christ's presence in the Sacrament of the Altar. These alterations were not arbitrary, nor were they made at random; they were the product of a specific intention — the "protestantizing" of Lutheranism. Or, to put it another way, what Luther and Melancthon did not complete in Germany in the sixteenth century, would be brought to fruition in America in the nineteenth. If the General Synod would adopt the *Definite Synodical Platform*, it would be quite clear that Lutheranism was "essential Evangelicalism."

As we know, this view of the Confessions and the Confessors did not commend itself to the mind of the Lutheran Church in the last century. Five synods of the General Synod — Hartwick, Southwestern Virginia, Alleghany, Miami, and Central Pennsylvania — refused the document, condemning errors in it. Fifteen other constituent synods either ignored or rejected the document. Three small synods — East Ohio, Wittenberg, and the Olive Branch Synod — adopted it. The response was, to Schmucker, Kurtz, and Sprecher, disappointing.

That is not entirely the end of the story. Under the leadership of Dr. Kurtz, a Melancthonian Synod was organized in Maryland in 1857. The name indicates the contention of the triumvirate that they — not the Symbolists — really understood the Reformers. This Synod was constituted along the lines of Lutheran Evangelicalism. When it applied for admission to the General Synod, meeting in 1857 in Pittsburgh, there was heated debate. In spite of the opposition of English Confessionalists, the Melancthonian Synod was allowed to join the General Synod.

The precedent was established, and a more severe test came with the Franckean Synod, a body founded in 1837 on a platform of abolitionism, revivalism, and doctrinal revisionism. Serious efforts to seat this Synod in the national organization often floundered on sectional issues. Southern Lutherans were not about to approve such a synod. With the secession of the Southern Synods to found their own church in 1863, that obstacle was removed. Now the issue was clear-cut. Would the General Synod accept the Franckeans — or would it reject them? The issue was that of confession. The meeting at York in May 1864 was a heated one with efforts at compromise, the final resolution being that the Franckeans could join if they would indicate the intention of ratifying the Augustana.

As we know in retrospect, this was the beginning of the end for both the General Synod and the American Lutheranism of

Schmucker, Kurtz, and Sprecher. Their victory was pyrrhic. In 1866 the General Synod was falling apart; in 1867 a confessional secession would occur, resulting in the General Council, so that, where once there had been one church-body, there were now three — a United Synod of the South, a General Council, and a small group continuing as the General Synod.

For the next century Lutheranism's concerns were directed elsewhere — and, if any challenge seemed to be a major one, it was that of theological Liberalism. As Lutheranism enters the 1980's, however, it appears that the key issue will again be what it was in the 1820's — the relationship of Lutheranism to Evangelicalism. It will be a challenge for Lutherans to keep the Catholic and Evangelical components in harmony, in a confessional synthesis that is also genuinely Reformed, Protestant, and Christian. Surely historical evaluation of the meaning of Luther and Melancthon will continue to play a central function in this process.

Footnotes

1. Edmund Jacob Wolf, *The Lutherans in America* (New York: J.A. Hill and Company, 1889), p. 94.
2. Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1979.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
4. This was the golden age of Unitarianism. Harvard, once a bastion of Puritanism, was now a center of Unitarian faith. We often forget how influential Unitarianism was in the early republic; it is instructive to count the number of Unitarian presidents in that era. The sister movement, Universalism, at times seemed on the threshold of becoming a "folk-church" in the West.
5. Heavy Irish and German immigration, plus the acquisition of Spanish and Mexican lands in the Southwest, gave America, for the first time, a large Roman Catholic population.