

# **Lutheran Confessionalism**

## **“Why We Are The Way We Are”**

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## **Preface**

I can't count the number of times someone has asked me, "Why are we conservative?" Or, "Why are we the way we are?" Or, "With everything that's going on with Lutherans trying to unite with other denominations, where do we fit in?" Those are short questions that require very long answers. Sometimes I respond, "Oh, it's a long story. How much time do you have?!" Or, "I know a good book you can read." But some people do not have the time or desire to read long and sometimes complicated books about theology and history.

Usually I respond to those types of questions by talking about our commitment to the Scriptures, compared to that of other churches. I also talk about being "Confessional" Lutherans. The term "confessional" throws a lot of people off, though. So I need to define "confessionalism." That usually requires a review of some history and some doctrine.

The purpose of this paper is to answer those questions, with the focus on what it means to be "confessional." Basically, this is a history of Confessional Lutheranism. Volumes have been written on this subject, so I realize that I am not contributing anything to the scholarly and academic world. But I do consider this paper to be a contribution. The contribution is to my own ministry. I would give this paper (or some future revision or refinement) to someone to read in order to give them a brief, thumbnail sketch of a very broad and complex subject. This paper is intended to be an instructional tool for someone seeking answers to questions like the ones mentioned above.

## **Introduction**

When we study “history” we look back and we evaluate decisions people made and the circumstances under which people made the decisions they did. The historian’s job is not to simply recount what happened, when and by whom, rather, to ask, “Why did things happen the way they did?” Because of all the changes going on today on the American religious scene, I think it’s a good time to look back and ask some questions: “Why are we the way we are today?” “There are so many different denominations of Christians, where do we fit in?” “Why are we part of a small Lutheran synod and not part of one of the larger ones?” One of the reasons we study history is to help us answer tough questions such as those. Doing so helps us then to look at the future, with all of its own peculiar challenges, with fresh confidence that we are on the right road—the road that our founding fathers put us on, or I should say, the road that our Heavenly Father put us on.

The purpose of this paper is to take a look back—to look back on the history of the Lutheran church in a way that hopefully asks and answers those tough questions mentioned above. The history of the Lutheran faith is long and complicated. In this paper, I will attempt to show how we fit in to this rich and complex Lutheran history and heritage. To do this, I will look at the big picture. For example, if I want to paint a garage, I might use a wide brush so I can cover as much area as possible in a short amount of time. If I want to paint a detailed portrait, I would have to use a very fine brush. In this paper I will use a “wide brush” approach. I hope to cover a lot of history in a relatively short paper so I won’t delve into a lot of detail. Along the way I will mention some books that

might be good sources of information for the inquisitive ones among you who like detail.

## **The Reformation and Beyond**

In 1517 when Martin Luther nailed the famed "95 Thesis" to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, little did he know the firestorm of change that would take place in the world in the years, decades and centuries to come. It's hard for us to imagine what the religious scene was like in Luther's day. Imagine what it would be like with only one Christian denomination, no Lutherans, Baptists, Methodists or Presbyterians.

In Luther's day, there was one church with its leadership in Rome and all of the teachings and doctrine came out of that church. The sole source of doctrine, or church teaching and practice, of the Roman church in Luther's day was Scripture together with "church tradition." "Church tradition" was the practice of the church over time and in particular, the teachings handed down from the church hierarchy in Rome. In other words, the doctrine and teaching of the church was what the leadership, the Pope and the bishops, said it was. The people had to follow the word of its leaders. Since the vast majority of the common folk in the Middle Ages were uneducated peasants and illiterate, and also because Bibles were not being printed in large supply, the people were left without knowledge of the Bible, other than what they heard read in church on Sunday. But since the church services were spoken in Latin, the people couldn't understand much anyway. The people were generally taught that as long as they were "connected" to the church by virtue of their membership and participation in the Sacraments, they would receive God's grace and forgiveness of sins as the church meted it out to them.

Much has been written about The Reformation (also known as The Protestant Reformation, The German Reformation and The Lutheran Reformation) regarding

the circumstances, causes and results.<sup>1</sup> It's not my purpose to get into all of that here, except to say that The Reformation changed the face of Christianity in the world like no other force in human history, except the birth of our Savior itself. Furthermore, The Reformation didn't just happen and then come to a quick and neat end. The forces unleashed in The Reformation continued to impact development of religious groups for years to come. When you ride up and down Mainstreet America today, the many different religious denominations you see are products, one way or another, of The Reformation.

Getting back to Luther, the greatest and most important result of The Reformation in Germany was the restoration of the Bible as the only source and basis for all church teaching and practice. There were other changes too, such as church services in the common language and attempts to educate the common people in the truths of God's word, the Bible. The Reformation that started in German Saxony spread like wildfire to other parts of Germany and especially, very quickly, to the Scandinavian countries. Also during this time new and improved printing processes were being invented and Bibles and religious literature were flying off of printing presses at previously unheard of rates. God's word was reaching the masses.

The single, most important teaching, or doctrine, that came out of the Lutheran Reformation is this: a person is saved entirely by the grace of God through faith in the redeeming work of God's Son, Jesus Christ. The "Doctrine of Objective Justification" says that by virtue of Christ's perfect life and innocent suffering and death, the entire world is declared "Not guilty" of all sin. God's "Not guilty" verdict becomes ours individually through faith, faith that God himself gives to us through the Means of Grace, the Gospel in Word and the Sacraments of

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<sup>1</sup> The libraries are full of books on Luther and The Reformation. A good one is Luther the Reformer, by James M. Kittelson, Augsburg Publishing House, 1986.

Baptism and the Lord's Supper. This doctrine, or teaching, is revealed to us through God's word, the Scriptures. Luther was firm in his conviction that the Holy Scriptures are God's inspired revelation to man and the sole source and norm for the Christian faith and life. Luther relied entirely on the truths of Scripture to draw from for the teaching of the church. While it is true that Scripture is often hard to understand and sometimes conflicts with our human logic and reason, we must rely on Scripture and, as Luther said, avoid the devil's trap of human reason. When you read Luther's writings, this theme of the truth of Scripture and the frailty of sinful man's reason always rings out. It's no wonder that the slogan of The Reformation became *sola gratia, sola scriptura, sola fide*—Grace alone, Scripture alone, Faith alone.

As the word of God was restored to the Christian church, there were also many other traditions and practices that developed over time, not directly commanded or forbidden by the Scriptures. The Lutheran approach was to retain those church practices and traditions that were not forbidden by the Scriptures. For example, the liturgy of the worship service (called "the Mass") was something not directly advocated or forbidden by Scripture, but rather had developed over the years as an orderly and dignified way of worshipping God and hearing his word. "The Mass," Luther thought, could be retained, as long as any false teachings associated with it were removed. The altars, the statues, paintings and stained glass windows depicting Biblical characters were allowed to remain because they were neither commanded nor forbidden by the Scriptures. The garments worn by the minister presiding at the mass were generally retained as well. The people had become accustomed to these things, so why change them? In other words, the Lutheran service would have looked very much like the Roman mass, except for one major difference: the language of the liturgy, songs and hymns needed to be the language of the common people, not Latin which

was understood only by the priests and academics. Therefore, one of the other gifts of The Reformation to the church was the joy of Christians raising their voices together with hymns and songs of praise. Needless to say, many hymns were written during this time, many of which we still sing today.

During this period of the early and mid 1500's, Luther wasn't the only reformer at work. There were other religious leaders with their own views developing a following as well. When Luther and his colleagues took their stand against the Pope and the Roman church authorities, others were taking their stand as well. What these reformers had in common with the Lutherans was a commitment to the Scriptures as the sole source for church teaching and practice. But these other reformers tended to want to use human reason and logic to sort out Scriptural teachings that otherwise didn't make sense to them. So different groups began forming around the teachings of other reformers who differed with the Lutherans on important teachings.

One such doctrine unique to the Lutherans is the "Means of Grace." The "Means of Grace" are the means by which and through which God offers and gives his grace, namely, the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. Based upon the teachings of Scripture, the Lutheran reformers taught that the "Means of Grace" is the gospel—the good news that Jesus lived and died in our place to remove the guilt of our sin and restore the relationship with our Creator that was lost in the Garden of Eden. The "Means of Grace" also include the Sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. Through these Sacraments, instituted by Christ, God's grace is also offered and given for the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. The Sacraments are proclamations of the gospel, together with visible elements—water in the case of Baptism and bread and wine in the case of the Lord's Supper. The important thing to remember is that God comes to us through the Means of Grace, not we to God. God comes to us with his love and

mercy through Baptism and the Lord's Supper, not we to him. This is vitally important because other reformers in Luther's day turned the Sacraments around into rites and obligations that people perform for God. In summary, Lutherans taught that in Baptism, through water and the word, the Holy Spirit converted the heart of a person from unbelief to faith in Jesus Christ as Savior. God intends this miracle of the giving of saving faith for all people, including infants. And in the Lord's Supper, our Lord Jesus really and truly gives his own body and blood in, with and under the bread and the wine, exactly as he said to his disciples, "This is my body," "This is my blood."

The other religious groups that developed in the early to mid 1500's tended to form around different views of the Sacraments. They saw the Lutheran teaching of the Sacraments too "Roman." After all, the Roman church did teach and practice infant Baptism and the presence of the Lord's body and blood in Holy Communion. (It should be noted also that the Roman church had a different definition of Sacrament, thus had seven Sacraments rather than two. The Roman church also had a different working definition of "grace" and how and why God conveyed grace to human souls.) These other reformers developed different views of the Sacraments, that they were not "Means of Grace," but rather ordinances or obligations that people must perform to show obedience to God. Thus some of these other religious groups did away with the practice of infant baptism because their human reason and logic said that infants were not capable of placing their faith in Christ for forgiveness of sins. They also said that infants were not accountable for their sin until a certain age. These other religious groups also said that Jesus didn't mean what he said about his body and blood being given along with the bread and wine. This too conflicts with human reason and logic, they said. It seemed more reasonable to these reformers that Jesus



meant that this bread and wine merely “represented” his body and blood, that they were not really present.

These other reformers saw the Lutheran Reformation as not going far enough to rid the church of any rite or practice that even hinted of Papism or Romanism, that is, teachings of the Pope and the church at Rome. In other words, if it looks Roman Catholic, it must be wrong, according to some of these other reformers. Some of the reformers came to be known as “radical reformers” because they threw out of the church anything that developed before The Reformation. They destroyed statues, altars, stained glass windows, paintings, artwork and anything else they thought hinted of Roman Catholic influence. The liturgy was done away with and other worship forms developed. The garments that the minister wore during the service were thrown out and he then wore whatever the normal dress for the day was, like a black academic robe. (I should mention now for future reference that these “radical reformers” were not Lutheran, but they influenced some Lutherans and some of these same things happened in Lutheran churches years later.)

As I mentioned above, Martin Luther was not the only Christian reformer.<sup>2</sup> Another reformer, a younger contemporary of Luther, was a Frenchman named John Calvin. Although Calvin was not a monk or priest like Luther he was a brilliant theologian who was deeply devoted to the Scriptures and also strongly influenced by what Luther was doing in Germany. As Calvin’s doctrine developed, though, he differed from Luther on some key points. Those areas of difference included the use of human reason in Bible interpretation and the proper understanding of the Means of Grace. While Luther’s followers called themselves “Lutherans,” Calvin’s followers eventually called themselves “The Reformed.” In

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<sup>2</sup>Many of the details for this section are from A History of Christianity, Volume II, Reformation to the Present, by Kenneth Scott Latourette, Harper & Row, Publishers, 1975.

theology, we often compare the three major doctrinal camps: Lutheran, Reformed and Roman Catholic. The term "Reformed" as used in this paper, refers to Christian denominations that either call themselves "Reformed" or have their roots in Reformed doctrine.

Two other reformers that should be mentioned here include a Swiss, Huldreich (Ullrich) Zwingli, and a Dutchman, Jacob Arminius. Zwingli was a contemporary of Luther. He too was deeply devoted to the Scriptures and in strong opposition to the Roman Catholics. Zwingli had an entirely different view of the Sacraments and The Means of Grace. He taught that in the Lord's Supper, the bread and the wine merely "represented" the body and the blood of Christ. (Although Calvin was closer to Luther with his teaching on the Lord's Supper, Calvin's followers eventually taught "representation" also.) Zwingli and his followers were more "radical" in their reformation. For example, Zwingli opposed the use of music in their services. A couple of Zwingli's followers were even more "radical" than Zwingli. They did not believe in infant baptism, but they did believe that a person needed to be re-baptized. Their followers thus became known as "Anabaptists" (re-baptizers). (This name is not to be confused with modern day Baptists, though they have a similar view of Baptism.) Another important reformer was Jacob Arminius. He was a generation or so younger than Luther and a Calvinist. As an influential professor at a Calvinist university in Holland, he also differed with Calvinists and Lutherans on the issue of man's "free will" and the ability of man to contribute his own salvation. Arminius maintained that a person could contribute to his own salvation by at least being inclined positively toward God's grace. This contradicts both the Lutheran and the Reformed teachings concerning "original sin" and man's total inability to contribute to his own salvation either through good works or "making a decision" to accept God's grace.

It's no easy task to look at the various denominations operating around us today and say what doctrinal group they fall into. So much has changed since these early reformers fought their doctrinal battles against Rome and against each other. But, generally speaking, most of today's mainstream religious groups can trace their roots to one of these reformers, not so much by name but by doctrinal stance.

So much more could be said about the causes and results of The Reformation and the changes that occurred as the result of it in Europe and beyond. I give this thumbnail sketch because it underscores the question we are asking and answering in this paper: "Where do we fit in?" "Why are we the way we are today?" We are products of our history. The forces of change in the Christian church on earth today have their roots way back in The Reformation. As I mentioned above, The Reformation begun by Dr. Martin Luther in the early 1500's was not a simple little event that came to a quick and neat end and everyone lived happily ever after. The Reformation is a watershed in human history that changed the world and has influenced the world and human events ever since. The Reformation was just the beginning. As the various reformers like Luther and John Calvin and their followers debated the doctrines of Scripture, lines were being drawn and stands were being taken, stands that have effected Christianity ever since. The debates and doctrinal controversies that developed while Luther was still alive and then immediately after his death caused splinter groups even among the Lutherans. At the same time the other Reformed denominations also quickly gave rise to splinter groups and more separate groups of Christians. The Christian world got very complicated very fast. The Lutherans once again had to take a stand for the truth of God's word. The next road I will take in this paper will be to discuss "Lutheran Confessionalism."

## **The Lutheran Confessions**

II Thessalonians 2:15: So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter.

II Timothy 3:14,16; 4:1-3: But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine.

I Peter 3:15: But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.

There are dozens of Bible passages that command us to stand firm in what we believe and also to stand up for the truth. There are passages that command us as Christians to make public proclamation of what we believe. God's word is inseparable from what we believe. Notice also, according to Peter, that giving an answer to every one concerning what we believe and in whom we place our hope flows from having Christ set apart in our hearts as Lord. As these and other passages set forth, we are to hold to the truths of God's word. God's word is from God himself and we are to teach it and preach it. It's natural then for Christians to make public confession of what they believe and teach.

Christians already formalized the public confession of their faith by the second century with the Apostle's Creed. This formal Creed, or confession of faith, was designed to be a straightforward declaration to the world at large of what Christians believed and taught. By the fourth century, certain doctrinal errors had crept into the church and the church had to take a stand for the truth of what it

believed and taught. The Nicene Creed was developed as another clear and concise declaration of the truths of God's word, especially concerning the second person of the Trinity, the Son of God, Jesus Christ. Another creed that was developed by the early church was the Athanasian Creed. These three creeds together are often called the three "ecumenical creeds" because they were intended to unite the Christian church on earth around the truth, and to take a united stand against any heresy or error that denied the teachings of God's word.

Throughout The Reformation it was necessary again and again for Luther and his followers to stand firm on what they believed and to publicly proclaim the truth of God's word. Thus more confessions were developed. Each of the Lutheran Confessions was written under different circumstances and each has its own character depending upon the reasons it was written.<sup>3</sup> What all of the Lutheran Confessions have in common is that they state clearly where the Lutheran church stands on the teachings of Scripture. The Lutheran Confessions aren't just "traditions." Rather, the Lutheran Confessions are "Christian Confessions." The Lutheran Confessions are consistent with the historical teachings of Christianity that our Lord passed on to his church through his Apostles. The Lutheran reformers didn't create "new teachings." They restored the church to its original doctrinal roots—the truth of God's word.

The Book of Concord of 1580 is made up of the Lutheran Confessions, including: The Three Creeds, Luther's Large and Small Catechisms, The Augsburg Confession and The Apology to the Augsburg Confession, the Smalcald Articles, and The Formula of Concord. When we call ourselves

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<sup>3</sup> The classic history of the development of the Lutheran Confessions is Historical Introduction to the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, by F. Bente, Concordia Publishing House, 1921. Another source for good, readable information on the development of the Confessions and the Confessions themselves can be found in Our Great Heritage, Volume II, articles by various authors, Northwestern Publishing House, 1991.

"Confessional Lutherans" we mean that we subscribe to and adhere to all of the Lutheran Confessions contained in The Book of Concord of 1580. When "Confessional Lutheran" pastors (as in the Wisconsin Synod) are ordained and installed into the ministry, they promise to be faithful to the Holy Scriptures as the inspired and inerrant word of God AND to the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church as set forth in The Book of Concord of 1580. We adhere to the Lutheran Confessions *because (quia)* they set forth in truth the doctrines of Holy Scripture. This is important for all of us to remember. Being "Confessional Lutherans" makes us different from many other Lutherans. Most Lutherans today do not make the claim of being "confessional." Most Lutherans today do not subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions, though they may subscribe to some of them *in so far as* they agree with the Scriptures. This "*in so far as*" clause is a reservation to full adherence to the Confessions and allows the pastor or the church to place less than full reliance on the Scriptures. In other words, if the pastor or church or church body does not confess the Scriptures as God's inspired word, free from error, and the only source and norm for Christian faith and life, he or they will not adhere to the Lutheran Confessions either, which are in fact drawn from the Scriptures.

## **17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> Century European Lutheranism**

In this section, I will give a brief overview of the developments of Lutheranism in Europe in from 1580, through the 1600's and 1700's and into the 1800's.<sup>4</sup>

The period from 1580 to about 1675 is often called the "Period of Orthodoxy." The Reformation is still fresh in the mind of this second generation of Lutheran pastors and theologians, as are all of the controversies dealt with and hopefully

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<sup>4</sup> This review of the various movements within Lutheranism is drawn primarily from the class notes in Church History at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.

settled with The Formula of Concord. Unfortunately, many disputes still lingered. This was a period of great debate and dispute over the relatively new public confessions of the Lutheran church over against the other Protestant churches forming and growing in Germany and Europe. "Orthodoxy" means "straight teaching." This period is especially known for the formulation of Lutheran doctrine through the systematic study of the Bible. The emphasis was on the objective truth of God's word, the doctrine of justification through faith, and the Means of Grace as the tools that God gave his church for the saving of souls. On the downside, this was also a time when the leadership of the church was so caught up in debate and dispute, they lost touch with the spiritual needs of the common folk. Some call this an academic age, when theology was an academic pursuit, rather than spiritual. That point is debatable though, as you would see if you looked at many of our hymns that were written at this time. It is true that the hymns are instructional in nature, but they are also spiritual and uplifting. During this period also, much of Germany was devastated and millions of lives were lost in the Thirty Years War—one of the bloodiest religious wars in history. Life was hard—more difficult than we can possibly imagine.

The period from the late 1600's to about 1750 is known as the "Age of Pietism." "Pietism" was the answer and result of what is sometimes called the period of "dead orthodoxy." People tired and worn out from decades of war and disease sought more personal religion than what was offered by the "Orthodox Lutherans." The "Age of Pietism" is characterized as a time of more spiritual than academic religion. There was less emphasis on the doctrine of the Christian faith and more emphasis on living the Christian faith. "Pietism" more than encouraged a sanctified and pious life of church members, these things were required, thus legalism became a trademark of the pietists. One of the most destructive results of "Pietism" was the belief that the Holy Spirit worked directly in the hearts of

people and not through the Means of Grace. The emphasis was on the "feelings" associated with conversion and faith, rather than the objective truth of God's word and his promises. While personal and individual devotion to Bible study increased, the use of the Sacraments decreased. Good works were stressed as outward signs of one's inner spirit of faith. Pietism downplayed the differences between the Reformed faith and the Lutheran faith from a doctrinal standpoint, and that fostered a climate where union of Reformed and pietistic Lutherans became possible and likely.

From about 1750 through 1830 Europe underwent some major social and political upheavals. The greatest, of course, were the French Revolution in the 1790's and the conquests of Napoleon in the first decade of the 1800's. On the religious scene, this was the "Period of Rationalism." As Europeans became more educated and rebellious, they began questioning the "old way of thinking" and rebelled against established authorities. The "new way of thinking" was considered more "enlightened." Philosophers had quite an impact on the people at large. The emphasis was on man and man's impact on historical events, rather than God being the Lord of history. These philosophical movements effected the religious scene in a big way. Germany was not only the center of the study of Theology. It was also the center of humanistic and rationalistic philosophy. In German universities by this time, the study of Lutheran Theology went hand in hand with rationalistic philosophy. "Rationalism" preferred a more scientific view of things. Thus the miracles of the Bible were discounted as clever myths. "Rationalism" relied on human reason to explain the problems in life and society. Thus, the "Period of Rationalism" is characterized as a time when the Biblical truths of original sin, Christ's atonement for sin, miracles and heaven and hell, among others, were rendered unacceptable by "any logical and rational thinking person." Rather than preach and teach the Biblical doctrines of sin and



grace—law and gospel—the role of the church was to improve morals, promote social peace and work toward improving the condition of human life.

“Rationalism” became deeply ingrained in Lutheranism in this period.

There was a general spiritual void left by the rationalists in the Lutheran Church. So from about 1830 to 1880 there was a “Period of Spiritual Awakening.” Once again there was an interest in Bible study, prayer and a personal relationship with God. It’s not that the true Bible based Christian faith died during the Period of Rationalism. Rather, the church leadership fell prey to rationalism as young pastors were graduated from universities that had adopted the “new way of thinking.” This “Period of Spiritual Awakening” was more of a grass-roots effort. Lay led Bible study and prayer groups became popular and the common people yearned to fill that spiritual void with God’s word. There was also a “Confessional Awakening” at this time. As people got back into the word of God, there was a resurgence in confessionalism and an awareness of the importance of studying, teaching and taking a stand on the Lutheran Confessions.

In the late 1800’s and early part of this century, “Rationalism” once again reared its head, though in a more subtle way. This was the “Period of Religious Liberalism.” This era was kind of a hodgepodge of religious movements. At this time the “Rationalist” view of the Scriptures became prevalent. The “historical-critical” method of Bible interpretation found it’s way into seminaries and universities, not just in Europe, but also in the young seminaries founded in the United States. In this method of Bible interpretation, the accounts of the Bible writers are not considered factual. The Bible is treated merely as literature and the scholarly interpreter must dig into the historical context to separate “fact from fiction.”

Scientists had long been looking for non-religious answers for the questions of the origin of the universe and the origin of life itself. Charles Darwin was not the

first man to theorize that life evolved in some way, but he was the first to develop a scientific system that proposed to finally answer the age old question, "Where did we come from?" The "Theory of Evolution" that was developed and became immensely popular in the scientific community in this period, fit right into the religious world as well. Religious "Rationalism" and the "historical-critical" method of Bible interpretation had already more-or-less rejected anything from the Bible that conflicted with human reason. Six-day creation was considered unbelievable by many and the Theory of Evolution was a boost for religious liberalism because it offered another "plausible explanation" other than God's miraculous creating activity.

Religious liberals who accepted scientific theories considered the miracles of the Bible impossible. Existence of angels and demonic spiritual forces were considered myths and old-fashioned superstition. The most influential theologians in Lutheran Germany questioned even the existence of the living God portrayed in the Bible. During this period, the virgin birth of Christ, Christ's divinity and his physical resurrection were questioned by some and totally discounted by others. Many people think that religious liberalism is a new or modern American problem. It's not. The liberals took a firm hold on the leadership of most churches, including the Lutherans, in this period.

There is one other major political development in Europe that I should mention here. This development had a major impact on Lutherans in Germany as well as in America. In 1817, on the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of The Reformation, the King of Prussia, Friedrich Wilhelm III, urged the Lutheran and the Reformed Christians living under his rule to unite. He "urged" his subjects to abandon their liturgies and doctrines, whether Lutheran or Reformed, and form a new "Evangelical" church. Since one of the major differences between the Lutherans and the Reformed was their doctrine of the Lord's Supper, the celebration of the Lord's

Supper was one of the things that had to change. The confessional Lutherans stood firm on their doctrine. Many conservative Reformed stood firm on their doctrine. But many other Lutherans and many Reformed followed the King's urging and joined in The Prussian Union. In 1831 the King changed his "urging" to a formal decree so that any Lutheran or Reformed pastors that did not conform and join the Union would be guilty of disobedience to the crown.<sup>5</sup>

I have so far only written a very broad and general history of the Lutheran faith from The Reformation through the end of the 1800's. An understanding of all this history of Lutheranism, even a very general knowledge, does help us to gain a feel for "where we fit in" and "why we are the way we are today." We are indeed products of our history and all of these forces of change in the religious world effected our forefathers and founders. Many of these influences like Orthodoxy, Pietism, Rationalism and Liberalism were very fresh in the mind of those who brought Lutheranism to America.

## **The Lutherans Come to America**

"Who are we?" "Why are we the way we are today?" Not only can we help to answer those questions by looking at the history of our church body in its native land, but we also need to look at why our ancestors came to this land. We will now, once again in a very broad way, look at the Lutheran immigration to the New World.<sup>6</sup>

Lutherans have been coming to America since the 1600's. In fact, the first Lutherans in the American Colonies were not Germans, but Swedes. In 1624, Gustavus Adolphus, King of Sweden and Finland, suggested a Swedish settlement in The New World. So in the mid 1600's Swedish colonists settled in

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<sup>5</sup> The Lutherans in North America, by E. Clifford Nelson, Editor, Fortress Press, 1980. Page 132.

Delaware. A Swedish Lutheran pastor came along and established the first Lutheran church in the Americas. The Swedish colonies had their ups and downs over the years, as did their churches. Although they were living in territories governed by the English authorities, they had a fair amount of religious freedom. By the early 1700's, though, after some years of having a good supply of pastors sent over from Sweden, the supply ran out and the Lutherans had a hard time finding pastors. The authorities in Sweden no longer had the commitment to support their American churches. The other major religious group was the Anglican (Episcopalian) Church. Desperate for someone to fill their pulpits, the Swedish Lutherans welcomed Anglican ministers to preach and lead worship in their churches. Eventually these Lutheran churches changed their constitutions and affiliated with the Episcopal Church.

In addition to the early Swedish immigration to the New World, Germans came in large numbers. Although immigrants were allowed a measure of religious freedom in all of the English colonies, the first Lutheran "success story" was in Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania was originally founded and established as a Quaker colony by William Penn, but it was known around the colonies and Europe as "friendly" to any and all religious groups. The first German settlement in America was Germantown, Pennsylvania, settled in 1683. During the early 1700's Germans came to America in large numbers. Many settled in Pennsylvania and the Philadelphia area because they were welcome there, land was cheap and farming was good.

German immigration was different from immigration from other nations. The English, French and Dutch were all involved in colonization of the New World, especially, of course, the English. Germany on the other hand had no capacity to colonize in other parts of the world because they themselves were not yet a nation as we know it today. They did not have a navy or merchant marine like the

other European powers. Additionally, the German people were usually devastated by war and disease during this time. In the early 1700's, the Germans have the English to thank for the opportunities to come to America, in particular, Queen Anne (Queen of England from 1702-1714). Queen Anne had a soft spot in her heart for Germans because her husband who died in 1708 was a German. In 1714, George I, a German from Hanover, became King of England and in 1727 his son George II took the throne and ruled until 1760. Both were Lutherans. But there was a lot more than sentimentality involved in the German immigration to the New World. The major reason the English recruited so many Germans to the colonies was economic. There was a great deal of competition between the French and the English. English and French have generally never liked each other, and neither have the Germans and the French. The Germans were good workers and farmers. The English needed them and the French didn't want them. The English won economic superiority over the French and thus the English colonies prospered and the German immigrants found cheap land and good opportunities for settlement in the New World.

The Germans that immigrated at this time were not just Lutheran. There were Reformed, Roman Catholic, Moravian, Baptist, Mennonite and other Christian denominations represented as well. Unlike the Swedes mentioned above, the Germans came along with their own pastors and had a reasonably good source of new pastors in the universities at home in Germany. Lutheran pastors were generally (not always, but generally) products of the university in which they were trained. At this point, it's important to remember that Lutheranism in Germany during this time was moving from the "Period of Pietism" to the "Age of Rationalism." In Germany in the mid 1700's there were still a few "orthodox" and "confessional" universities training pastors attempting to be faithful to the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. Many other universities had "pietistic"

tendencies. Thus they were training pastors who would have more “pietistic” leanings. But most universities in Germany and Europe were being taken over by “rationalist” philosophy. Therefore, many of the young pastors coming over to the New World would be more-or-less rationalistic. This point of all this is, even in the mid 1700’s, not all Christians who called themselves Lutheran were confessional, Bible believing Lutherans. There was a wide variety in the doctrinal positions of pastors serving the Lutherans in the New World. Doctrinal standards were lax at best and non-existent at worst. Other Christian denominations were in the same situation. Some were more conservative, some not. Some were more firm in their confessions and doctrines, some were not. The religious scene in America was no less complicated than it was in Europe.

One of the things that “Pietists” and “Rationalists” have in common is little or no interest in doctrinal standards. That makes both of these groups likely candidates for unions with Reformed and other church groups. This happened often on the American frontier. Some of the Lutherans and Reformed that came from Northern Germany who lived under the Prussian Union were already inclined toward having “union” views. Although formal denominational unions did not take place, Lutheran pastors regularly preached in Reformed churches, and vice-versa. American Lutheranism in the late 1700’s and into the 1800’s can be best described as “uncommitted”—uncommitted to the truth of the Scriptures, uncommitted to the Lutheran Confessions, uncommitted to standing firm for the truth.

In the mid 1800’s the immigrants kept coming. They came to escape persecution. They came to escape war. They came to escape famine. There were as many reasons to immigrate to America as there were groups immigrating. America was the land of the free and its doors were open. This age in American History was one of population growth, formation of large cities, and,

of course, The Civil War. Lutherans from Germany and the Scandinavian countries came by the millions. The numbers of Lutherans in America grew as well. It was time for Lutherans to organize. So synods were formed wherever Lutheran were concentrated. The first of the large synods was the General Synod, formed in 1820. This synod brought together various small, English speaking synods. This synod was not designed to bring together Lutherans of like doctrinal stance. In fact this synod didn't have much of a doctrinal stance at all. From a doctrinal standpoint, the only requirement for membership was some sort of commitment to the Augsburg Confession. One of the chief purposes of this synod was to train pastors to supply the member churches. The General Synod established their seminary in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Although this was not the first Lutheran seminary (the first was in New York, founded in 1815), it was the first east of the Appalachian Mountains. More seminaries were quickly established: South Carolina-1830; Columbus, Ohio-1831; Springfield, Ohio-1845; and Philadelphia-1864.

Many, many more synods were formed during this time. A variety of doctrinal stands were taken. In addition to the General Synod being the first truly American and English speaking synod, others were started by the other various ethnic groups that came to America. Synods comprised of Swedes, Norwegians, Danes, Finns, Slovaks, more Germans, and some combinations of the above quickly sprung up on the American frontier. Most of these synods tried hard to retain their own particular language and traditions. Time and space does not allow us to explore the doctrinal stand of each of the synods. Generally the English speaking synods like the General Synod mentioned above, tended to be the least concerned about the doctrine and confessions of the Lutheran faith. Most of these churches were involved in unionistic (ecumenical) activities with other denominations, with the notable exception of Roman Catholics and

non-Trinitarians (those who deny the Trinity, called Unitarians). Generally, the synods founded by the Scandinavian groups were more-or-less committed to the Augsburg Confession and Luther's Catechisms. Scandinavian Lutherans generally retained their own particular liturgical traditions and hymns. In other words, Swedes worship with Swedes, Norwegians with Norwegians, and so forth. They generally didn't mix. German Lutherans tended to be confessional and doctrinal on one hand, or rationalistic on the other hand. The influence of pietism existed to a greater or lesser degree in all of these groups. In other words, most of these synods that formed around ethnic groups were a mixed bag of pietists and rationalists with a few confessionalists thrown in, as well.

### **Confessional Lutheranism Comes to America**

So much more could be said about growth of Lutheran churches and the formation of synods. If the above discussion of the development of Lutheranism makes it sound like there were no confessional Lutherans in America, that's not the whole story. The discussion above serves to point out, though, that early Lutheran churches generally were not consistent—that there was a hodgepodge of doctrinal positions. It should be noted also, though, that there were small groups of conservative Lutherans standing firm on the Scriptures and on the Lutheran Confessions. The small groups of conservative, confessional Lutherans survived the periods of pietism and rationalism and survived the Prussian Union. In fact, as the majority of Lutherans abandoned the Lutheran Confessions, the conservatives became even stronger in their confessional position. These confessional Lutherans were proudly independent and openly defended themselves against efforts to unite with Reformed and other Christian denominations.



One such group of conservatives formed the Ohio Synod in 1818. The English speaking contingent in the Ohio Synod eventually gravitated toward the liberal General Synod. In 1845, large numbers of German speaking Lutherans withdrew from the Ohio Synod. Two men worthy of mention here are Frederick K. Wynekyn and William Sihler. In 1848, Pastor Wynekyn took his congregation out of the General Synod and joined the new Missouri Synod. In 1850 he became pastor of Trinity in St. Louis and was elected president of the Missouri Synod. Sihler was a professor of theology and philosophy in Germany when he came into contact with confessional Lutherans. He came to America in 1843 and served a congregation in the Ohio Synod. He left because of Ohio's growing liberalism and went to Fort Wayne, Indiana and helped to found a seminary there. He was involved in the organization of the Missouri Synod. He served as president of the Fort Wayne seminary (now Concordia Seminary, LC-MS) from 1846-1861.<sup>7</sup>

Another interesting character at this time was Johannes Konrad Wilhelm Loehe. He was born in 1808 in Franconia, Bavaria to confessional Lutheran parents. (Recall that 1808 was in the "Period of Rationalism.") In the 1830's he preached in several small towns in Bavaria and came into conflict with town leaders because of his Bible based preaching and confessionalism. While at home in Bavaria, he heard of the need for confessional Lutheran preachers and he took up the cause and raised money and men to send to America. He was instrumental in establishing the Fort Wayne Seminary and over the years sent nearly 100 students and teachers there for training. In 1853, differences with the Missouri Synod led him to start the Iowa Synod.

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<sup>7</sup> Much of the information for this section is from Church History class notes at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. Some information is from The Lutherans in North America.

The Missouri Synod was organized by a group of 700 immigrants from Saxony, Germany who settled in the St. Louis area in 1839. Their original leader was Pastor Martin Stephan. He was known for his Christ centered preaching in the midst of German rationalism. He was a persuasive fellow, was well liked and was able to gather this group to go to America for the purpose of establishing a planned Lutheran community. Stephan had himself elected "bishop" of this group and his followers swore unconditional obedience. After being charged with immoral behavior and adultery, he was expelled from the community. The Saxon community in St. Louis was in a state of spiritual and doctrinal turmoil over the scandal. A young pastor named Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther rose to the leadership of this group and was able to settle the disputes and turmoil and calm these Saxon Lutherans. In 1845 and 1846 the Lutherans from Missouri and those from Ohio and Indiana met off-and-on to discuss forming a new synod. On April 26, 1847, the German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio and Other States was founded by a group led by Walther and Sihler. This was the birth of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. Dr. C.F.W. Walther is known as the "Father of Confessional Lutheranism in America." Under his leadership, the Bible and the Lutheran Confessions were defended and taught. Every kind of unionism or fellowship with those who were not strict confessional Lutherans was renounced. Provisions were made for Christian day schools and for the publication of hymnals, liturgical books and catechisms.

As mentioned above, there were many other groups of German Lutherans scattered here and there in America. Also, back home in Germany there was a sincere interest in supporting these German settlements. In Germany there were "Mission Societies" which were formed to help ensure that the Lutheran settlements in America had a supply of pastors, as well as to do mission work among the natives and others. These "Mission Societies" were generally Bible

believing Christians intent on taking a stand against rationalism. They were usually not directly connected with any churches, but were free associations of Christians. They had pietistic tendencies so they were conservative but not particularly confessional or doctrinal. (Though some were more confessional, like Loehe, mentioned above.) Since many of them did not adhere to specific denominational doctrines they were unionistic. In other words, Lutherans and Reformed might work together to serve Germans, regardless denominational stance. There were a variety of these Mission Societies operating in Germany. Their mission was to help their German brothers and sisters who had immigrated to America. They sent pastors to seek out the German immigrants and provided financial assistance to new churches as well.

It's now time to tell the story of three men who were trained by the Mission Societies to seek out Germans in America.<sup>8</sup> One was John Muehlhaeuser. He served as a "pilgrim missionary" in Austria, Bohemia and Hungary for four years before joining one of the Mission Societies to obtain training to do mission work in Africa or Asia. Instead, he was sent to America and served for ten years in Rochester, New York. He heard about the great need of the Germans in Wisconsin and moved to Milwaukee in 1848. There he sold Bibles and religious tracts. In October of 1848, he started a German Lutheran church in Milwaukee. He named it Trinity, but since the Missouri Synod already had a Trinity Lutheran Church, he renamed it Grace Lutheran Church. The second was John Weinmann. He arrived in Rochester, New York in 1846 and was met by Muehlhaeuser and went on to Milwaukee. It was Weinmann who sent word to his friend Muehlhaeuser to come to Milwaukee. Weinmann quickly started churches in the Milwaukee area, including Caledonia, Greenfield, New Berlin and Racine.

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<sup>8</sup> The information in this section is from The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans, by Edward C. Fredrich, Northwestern Publishing House, 1992.

Weinmann's companion on this trip to Milwaukee was William Wrede, another pastor trained by the Mission Societies to serve the Germans in America.

On December 8, 1849 Muehlhaeuser, Weinmann and Wrede met at Grace Lutheran Church in Milwaukee and formed the "First Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin." The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod was born. Each of the three men and the others that quickly joined were generally from a pietistic background, though Weinmann and Wrede were more confessional than Muehlhaeuser, the leader. The original constitution of the new synod included a paragraph indicating that pastors were required to subscribe to ALL of the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Later on, in disagreement with Weinmann and Wrede, Muehlhaeuser crossed out the confessional paragraph and added clauses more reflective of his German pietistic roots. The new Wisconsin Synod therefore was sort of a mixed bag of pietistic and unionistic Lutherans and confessional Lutherans.

### **Conclusion: From the Founding to the Present**

The new Wisconsin Synod was founded on less than solid confessional grounds. But it wouldn't take long for the pietistic and unionistic tendencies of Muehlhaeuser to be replaced by the confessionalism of new leaders. A young pastor named John Bading was graduated from his mission school in Germany in 1853 and sent to Milwaukee to serve in this "new synod." He was ordained by Pastor Muehlhaeuser, but not before there was a sharp disagreement between the two. Bading insisted upon ordination vows that pledged him completely to the Lutheran Confessions. Muehlhaeuser preferred not to use the confessional pledge. Young Bading evidently made his point because Muehlhaeuser ordained Bading as he had requested. The new Pastor Bading then emphasized his point further by preaching his sermon on the importance of the Lutheran Confessions.

In 1860 Muehlhaeuser declined reelection to the position of president of the synod. Bading was elected in his place. In his first two presidential addresses, in 1861 and 1862, he stressed full adherence to the Lutheran Confessions, not only in theory, but also in practice. While the new synod was still tied somewhat to the mission societies for money and manpower, it was on the right track toward confessionalism.

I mentioned the Missouri Synod above in the section on Confessionalism in America because we, the Wisconsin Synod, owe so much of our confessionalism to them. The Missouri Synod was the strong confessional force in American Lutheranism when Wisconsin was still young and trying to come into its own from a doctrinal standpoint. The two synods with German roots shared almost fifty years as confessional brothers and sisters in a land where most other Lutherans had wandered from the truths on which they were founded. Unfortunately, the Missouri Synod went the way of lax fellowship practices over the years. In the early 1960's, the Wisconsin Synod had to take another stand. The Wisconsin Synod broke fellowship with the Missouri Synod. It was not a popular stand. But because of the nature of the doctrinal problems in the Missouri Synod, it was a stand that had to be taken. It was a stand on the word of God and on the Lutheran Confessions.

Taking a stand on the truth of God's word isn't popular today either. You could say, "That's why we are the way we are today." We rely on God's word to lead us in our decisions, both as individual Christians and as a church body united around the truth. The Bible says to us, "Stand firm." We take God at his word and we believe, teach and confess what God says in his word, even if what God says isn't popular. That's where we fit in to the religious world. As Confessional Lutherans we are, by our very own mission, committed to taking our stand against all those around us who would rather set Scripture aside. In essence, lack of a

commitment to the truth of God's word is at the core of today's ecumenical and unionistic movements that we keep hearing about.

This has been a long historical journey through a broad and complex subject. I left out a lot of other information that could have been included. I simplified many of the issues. There is much more to say that I haven't said. But in all of this, I tried to develop the theme that we are the way we are not because of some modern day developments or events. Rather, our stand on the truth of God's word is the same stand that the Apostle Paul warned his readers to take. Our stand is the same stand that Martin Luther and his followers took. We don't take the Confessional stand we do because we are old fashioned or intolerant. We take the stand—we are the way we are—because God commands us to stand firm on his word. That's how we "fit in" to today's religious scene.

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