

A HISTORY OF THE LUTHERAN CHURCH (Compiled From Various Sources)

HOW GOD PREPARED MARTIN LUTHER TO CHANGE THE WORLD

Martin Luther (November 10, 1483 - February 18, 1546) was a Christian theologian and Augustinian monk whose teachings inspired the Protestant Reformation and deeply influenced the doctrines of Protestant and other Christian traditions. He is the founder of our Lutheran denomination, even though he only very reluctantly went along with the idea to give the denomination his name. No one would have guessed what lay in Martin Luther's future while he was growing up in Eisleben, Germany, but God had a plan for Martin, a plan for which he was divinely prepared. It started with education.

Martin's father, who had been born a peasant, owned a copper mine in Mansfeld, Germany. The family's prosperity - and Hans Luther's determination that his son rise above his own humble beginnings, led to an emphasis on learning. Consequently, Martin entered the University of Erfurt in 1501 at the age of 17 and graduated just one year later. Within three more years, he had completed his master's degree. Following his father's wishes, Martin enrolled in law school; however, as he was walking to school during a summer thunderstorm in 1505, lightning struck the ground near him. A terrified Martin called upon St. Anne to deliver him. In return, he vowed, "I'll become a monk." Although Luther regretted making the bargain, he kept his word, dropped out of law school, and entered the monastery.

Young Brother Martin tried desperately to please God - with fasts, flagellations, hours of prayer, and pilgrimages - but it seemed the harder he tried to please God, the more aware he became of his sinfulness, and the less inner peace he felt. In order to distract the young monk from his suffering, Luther's superior ordered him to further his academic career. Following his ordination as a priest in 1507, Luther began teaching theology at the University of Wittenburg. After completing one bachelor's degree in Biblical Studies and another in theology, he graduated in 1512 with a doctorate in Theology.

Luther's studies caused him to focus on the Scriptures and the early church. As he immersed himself in the Bible, he began to look on terms such as penance and righteousness as much more than words. And he became convinced that the Catholic Church, which at that time, was often corrupt and venal, had lost sight of several fundamental truths. To Martin Luther, the most important of these was the doctrine that brought him peace with God. A joyous Luther now believed and taught that salvation is a gift of God's grace, received by faith and trust in God's promise to forgive sins for the sake of Christ's death on the cross. This, he believed, was God's work from beginning to end.

LUTHER'S 95 THESES

On Halloween of 1517, Luther changed the course of human history when he nailed his 95 Theses to the church door at Wittenberg, accusing the Roman Catholic Church of heresy upon heresy. Many people cite this act as the primary starting point of the Protestant Reformation. Luther's action was in great part a response to the selling of indulgences by Johann Tetzel, a Dominican priest. Luther's charges also directly challenged the position of the clergy in regard to individual salvation. Before long, Luther's 95 Theses of Contention had been copied and published all over Europe.

"HERE I STAND"

Luther's Protestant views were condemned as heretical by Pope Leo X in the bull *Exsurge Domine* in 1520 and Luther was summoned to either renounce or reaffirm them at the Diet of Worms on 17 April 1521. When he appeared before the assembly, Johann von Eck, by then assistant to the Archbishop of

Trier, acted as spokesman for Emperor Charles the Fifth. Von Eck presented Luther with a table filled with copies of his writings and asked Luther if he still believed what these works taught. Luther requested time to think about his answer. Granted an extension, he prayed, consulted with friends and mediators and presented himself before the Diet the next day.

When the counselor put the same question to Luther the next day, the reformer apologized for the harsh tone of many of his writings, but said that he could not reject the majority of them or the teachings in them. Luther respectfully but boldly stated, "Unless I am convinced by proofs from Scriptures or by plain and clear reasons and arguments, I can and will not retract, for it is neither safe nor wise to do anything against conscience. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen."

On May 25, the Emperor issued his Edict of Worms, declaring Martin Luther an outlaw.

EXILE

Luther had powerful friends among the princes of Germany, one of whom was his own prince, Frederick the Wise, Elector of Saxony. The prince arranged for Luther to be seized on his way from the Diet by a company of masked horsemen, who carried him to the castle of the Wartburg, where he was kept for about a year, during which Luther grew a wide flaring beard; took on the garb of a knight and assumed the pseudonym Jorg. This period of time wasn't a period of rest or monastic isolation for Luther. He remained hard at work on his celebrated translation of the Bible, and - bearded and unrecognizable, Luther (as Jorg) made frequent forays into the nearby towns and markets. Thus developed Luther's familiarity with the vernacular language of the time. Because he had listened to ordinary people converse, he was able to put his translation of the Bible into the language of the people.

Although his stay at the Wartburg kept Luther hidden from public view, he often received letters from his friends and allies, asking for his views and advice. For example, Luther's closest friend, Philipp Melanchthon, wrote to him and asked how to answer the charge that the reformers neglected pilgrimages, fasts and other traditional forms of piety.

Luther's replied: "If you are a preacher of mercy, do not preach an imaginary but the true mercy. If the mercy is true, you must therefore bear the true, not an imaginary sin. God does not save those who are only imaginary sinners. Be a sinner, and let your sins be strong, but let your trust in Christ be stronger, and rejoice in Christ who is the victor over sin, death, and the world. We will commit sins while we are here, for this life is not a place where justice resides. We, however, says Peter (2. Peter 3:13), are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth where justice will reign." [Letter 99.13, To Philipp Melanchthon, 1 August 1521.]

"LUTHERANISM"

This teaching of Luther, forged from his discovery that the righteousness of God is not a righteousness that judges and demands but the righteousness given by God in grace, found its systematic expression in the formularies incorporated in the Book of Concord. All these documents, with the exception of the Formula of Concord, were written between 1529 and 1537 by Luther and Philip Melanchthon. They reflect the emphasis on justification by grace and the correction of abuses in the life of the church while at the same time "conserving" the church's catholic heritage (through explicit commitment to the ancient creeds, traditional forms of worship, church government, etc.).

During the years following Luther's death in 1546, theological conflicts increasingly plagued his followers. The Formula of Concord, composed of the Epitome of the Articles in Dispute and the Solid

Declaration of Some Articles of the Augsburg Confession, sought to resolve those disputes in terms of the authentic teaching of Luther. Subscription to these "symbolical" writings of the Book of Concord as true expositions of the Holy Scriptures has historically marked the doctrinal positions of Lutheranism.

DOCTRINES AND TEACHINGS

The theology of Lutheranism is first a theology of the Word. Its principle of *sola scriptura* affirms the Bible as the only norm of Christian doctrine. The Scripture is the *causa media* by which man learns to know God and his will; the Word is the one and the only source of theology. Lutheranism pledges itself "to the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments as the pure and clear fountain of Israel, which is the only norm according to which all teachers and teachings are to be judged and evaluated" (Formula of Concord, Epitome).

To be sure, the authority of Scripture had been emphasized prior to Luther and the Reformation. However, when Lutheranism referred to the Bible as the divine Word, brought to man through the apostles and prophets, it spoke with a new conviction regarding the primacy of the Word. Luther recognized that the authority of Scripture was valid even where it was opposed by pope, council, or tradition.

The Lutheran understanding of this principle should be distinguished from bibliolatry. Historic Lutheranism viewed Scripture as the organic foundation of faith. It is the source of theology in an instrumental sense. It is not the cause of the being of theology; that would truly be a deification or worship of a book. Rather, God is the first cause of theology; he is the *principium essendi*, its foundation, its beginning, and its end. The Scripture is the *principium cognoscendi*, for from Scripture theology is known and understood. Furthermore, the Lutheran view of the Bible is to be distinguished from a legalistic orientation. Christ is at the center of the Bible. Essential to understanding the Word of God is accepting the promises of the gospel by faith. If this faith is lacking, the Scriptures cannot be correctly understood.

The second doctrinal distinctive of Lutheranism is the doctrine of justification. According to Luther there are two kinds of righteousness, an external righteousness and an inner righteousness. External righteousness, or civil righteousness, may be acquired through just conduct or good deeds. However, inner righteousness consists of the purity and perfection of the heart. Consequently, it cannot be attained through external deeds. This righteousness is of God and comes as a gift of his fatherly grace. This is the source of justification.

The ground for justification is Christ, who by his death made satisfaction for the sins of mankind. The Apology of the Augsburg Confession defines justification as meaning "to absolve a guilty man and pronounce him righteous, and to do so on account of someone else's righteousness, namely, Christ's." Thus God acquits man of all his sins, and he does this not because man is innocent; rather God justifies us and declares man to be righteous for Christ's sake, because of His righteousness, His obedience to God's law, and His suffering and death. When God justifies, He not only forgives sins, but He also reckons to man Christ's perfect righteousness. God declares sinners to be righteous, apart from human merit or work, for the sake of Christ (forensic justification).

Related to this teaching is the third significant hallmark of Lutheranism: *sola fide*. The means whereby justification accrues to the individual is faith. The gospel, as Lutheranism confessed it, made faith the only way by which man could receive God's grace. In the medieval scholastic tradition theologians spoke of faith as something that could be acquired through instruction and preaching (*fides acquisita*). This was distinguished from infused faith (*fides infusa*), which is a gift of grace and implies adherence to all revealed truth. Lutheranism repudiated this distinction. The faith which comes by preaching

coincides with that which is justifying; it is wholly a gift of God. Justifying faith is not merely a historical knowledge of the content of the gospel; it is acceptance of the merits of Christ. Faith, therefore, is trust in the mercy of God for the sake of his Son. Lutheranism has persistently refused to see faith itself as a "work." Faith is receptivity, receiving Christ and all that he has done. It is not man's accomplishment that effects his justification before God. Faith is instead that which accepts God's verdict of justification: "Faith does not justify because it is so good a work and so God - pleasing a virtue, but because it lays hold on and accepts the merit of Christ in the promise of the holy Gospel" (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration).

The article of justification by grace through faith challenged the Roman Catholic tradition, which asserted that faith was pleasing to God only if it were accompanied by good works and perfected by love. At the Council of Trent in 1545 the Lutheran view was condemned and the medieval Roman Church reiterated its doctrine that justification is a state of grace in which human good works have merit. For Lutheranism, faith and works certainly cannot be separated; however, they must be distinguished. The righteousness of faith refers to man in his relation to God (*coram Oeo*). The righteousness of good works refers to man in relation to his neighbor (*coram hominibus*). These must not be confused so as to intimate that man will seek to become just in the sight of God on the strength of his good deeds, nor in such a way that he will attempt to conceal sin with grace. Thus, with respect to justification strictly speaking, good works must be clearly distinguished. But faith cannot be apart from works. Where there is faith in Christ, love and good works also follow.

An important element of Lutheran biblical interpretation is that one takes words of command and promise literally unless there is some compelling reason for not doing so. If the words of institution at the Supper were to be taken figuratively, simply because they appear to conflict with reason or common sense (e.g., the Reformed axiom of the finite being incapable of the infinite), one could do so with any command or promise of God. Thus, Lutheranism has insisted on the doctrine of the "real presence" on the basis of Christ's plain words.

THE SPREAD OF LUTHERANISM

Lutheranism soon became more than the experience of Luther, but it never deviated from his theme that people are made right with God *sola gratia and sola fide* - that is, only by the divine initiative of grace as received through God's gift of faith. Because Luther came across his discoveries by reading the Bible, he also liked to add to his motto the exhortation *sola scriptura*, which means that Lutherans are to use the Bible alone as the source and norm for their teachings. The Lutheran movement gained popularity quickly in Germany at a time of rising nationalism among people who resented sending their wealth to Rome. The early Lutherans were strongly based in the universities and used their learning to spread the faith among an international community of scholars. By 1530 they were formulating their own Confessions of Faith and proceeding independently amid the non-Lutheran reform parties that proliferated across most of northern Europe. By 1580 and through the next century, these confessions became increasingly rigid scholastic expressions, designed to define the church in formal terms. Ever since, Lutheranism has been known as a doctrinal church.

From the beginning, Lutheranism had to wrestle with the problem of its relation to civil authorities. Although Luther was a rebel against papal teaching, he was docile about reforming the civil order and rejected radical revolts by the peasants (Peasants' War). Fearing anarchy more than authoritarianism, the Lutherans gravitated to biblical teachings that stressed the authority of the state more than the civil freedom of its citizens. Most of them were content not to separate church and state, and in the Peace of Augsburg (1555) approved the principle that the ruler determined the faith of the ruled. Later Lutherans have enthusiastically embraced republican and democratic government as applications of the principle that God is active in different ways through the two realms of civil and churchly authority.

Lutherans have been more ready than many other Christians to see the permanence of evil in the powers of the created and fallen world, that is, the world under the influence of sin. Consequently, they have put more of their energies into works of welfare and charity - into orphanages, hospitals, and deaconesses' movements - than into social schemes to transform the world.

THE POST-REFORMATION LUTHERAN CHURCH

The doctrines of Lutheranism were subject to a variegated history in the centuries following the Reformation era. In the seventeenth century they were elaborated in a scholastic mold. Lutheran orthodoxy, whose classical period began about the year 1600, was an extension of the tradition represented by the Lutheran confessional writings. It was, however, profoundly influenced by the neo-Aristotelianism which had secured a foothold in the German universities. This German scholastic philosophy accentuated the intellectual strain which characterized Lutheran orthodoxy and prompted a more pronounced scientific and metaphysical treatment of theological questions. However, scholastic methodology did not lead to the surrender of Lutheran emphasis on the Bible.

The dogmatic works of the orthodox period were based on the principle of *sola Scriptura*. There was an effort to systematize an objective form of theology (theology defined as a "teaching about God and divine things"). Revelation, as codified in the Bible, provided the point of departure for the orthodox theologians. The chief representatives of this period of Lutheranism included Johann Gerhard, Nikolaus Hunnius, Abraham Calov, and David Hollaz.

The period of Lutheran orthodoxy gave way to the pietist movement in the latter part of the seventeenth century. Pietism was a reaction to what was perceived as an arid intellectualism in the orthodox theologians. Philipp Jakob Spener's *pia desideria* called for a reform movement within Lutheranism. According to Spener, experience is the basis of all certainty. Therefore, the personal experience of the pious is the ground of certainty for theological knowledge. This led to the pietist critique of the metaphysical questions treated by the orthodox fathers as well as their traditional philosophical underpinnings. For the pietist Lutherans inner spiritual phenomena and individual experiences elicited the greatest interest. Since Spener and his followers assumed that theological knowledge could not be acquired apart from the experience of regeneration, their theological expositions dealt mainly with empirical religious events.

In the eighteenth century theological rationalism appeared in Germany. Christian Wolff, utilizing the Leibnizian principle of "sufficient reason," argued that learning must be based on clear and distinct concepts and that nothing should be set forth without proof. Wolff's thought had a great impact on theological activity. Harmony between faith and reason was assumed, and the natural knowledge of God led to the idea of special revelation while the rational proofs for the truth of Scripture demonstrated that the Bible is the source of this revelation. While Wolff intended to defend traditional doctrine, the consequence of his method was the acceptance of reason as a final authority. This conclusion was extended by Johann Semler, who applied a historicocritical method to the Bible and inserted it totally into the framework of human development.

Many Lutherans saw the influence of rationalism behind the Prussian Union of 1817. Frederick William III announced the union of the Lutherans and the Reformed into one congregation at his court in celebration of the three hundredth anniversary of the Reformation and appealed for similar union throughout Prussia. The union was the impetus for a revival of Lutheran confessionalism which reacted to an increasing doctrinal indifference in some quarters of German Lutheranism as well as a growing interest in biblical criticism that threatened to remove the doctrinal foundations of Luther's church. Prominent figures in the effort to restore historical Lutheranism were C.P. Caspari, E.W. Hengstenberg,

and C.F.W. Walther. Walther joined an emigration of Saxons to the United States in 1838 to escape the theological legacy of rationalism and the union.

Apart from Germany, where two thirds of the population had accepted Lutheranism by the end of the sixteenth century, the expansion of Lutheranism through Sweden, Denmark, and Norway left national churches that have endured in strength. From these nations Lutherans migrated to the United States and Canada.

THE MODERN LUTHERAN CHURCH

Because of their origin in the 16th century, the older European Lutheran churches are closely tied to their respective governments as established churches, either exclusively, as in the Scandinavian countries, or in a parallel arrangement with Roman Catholicism, as in Germany. (In both situations other religious groups have complete freedom of worship but not the same support and supervision from the government.) In non-European countries, Lutheran churches are voluntary religious organizations.

Lutheranism arrived in America with the early European settlers. In 1625 some Dutch, German, and Scandinavian Lutherans settled in New Amsterdam (now New York City). In 1638 another early Lutheran settlement was founded by Swedes in what is now Delaware. At the beginning of the 18th century German Lutherans settled in large numbers in Pennsylvania. In 1742 Pastor Henry Melchior Muhlenberg arrived from Germany and soon founded (1748) the first Lutheran synod in North America. After the American Revolution (1775-1783), each successive group of Lutheran immigrants founded its own churches and synods and conducted its services in the language of its country of origin.

Because of the large numbers of immigrants to the United States and Canada in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the integration of Lutherans into North American society went slowly, and Lutheranism was divided into numerous German, Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, Finnish, and Slovak groups. Following World War I (1914-1918), however, unification and integration proceeded rapidly. The process accelerated after World War II (1939-1945), and by the early 1980s mergers had consolidated most Lutherans in the United States and Canada into five major bodies: the Lutheran Church in America (LCA), Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS), the American Lutheran Church (ALC), the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS), and the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC). In 1988 the LCA, ALC, and AELC merged after five years of preparatory work, forming the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). In the early 1990s the ELCA reported a membership of more than 5.2 million in about 11, 000 churches. Membership in the LCMS was about 2.6 million, and in the WELS about 417,000. Lutheranism is the third largest Protestant denomination in the United States.

In 1997 the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America agreed to share full communion with three other Protestant denominations - the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the United Church of Christ, and the Reformed Church in America. The agreement meant that the churches could exchange clergy and that members could worship and receive sacraments at the other churches.

The Lutheran churches in the United States have Canadian counterparts. The newly formed Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, composed of wings of the former LCA and ALC churches, reported membership of 199,600 in the early 1990s. The Lutheran Church-Canada was originally a member of the LCMS but became autonomous in 1988. Reported membership is about 79,400. Although a majority of the world's Lutherans still live in the traditionally Lutheran countries of central and northern Europe, Lutheranism has been growing most rapidly in Africa and Asia. Indeed, the only country outside of Europe where a majority of the population is Lutheran is Namibia in southern Africa.

The Lutheran World Federation (LWF), headquartered in Geneva, coordinates the activities of almost all Lutheran churches in the world. It oversees ecumenical relations, theological studies, and world service and is guided by an international executive committee. Most Lutheran churches are also members of the World Council of Churches. A uniform system of church government has never developed in Lutheranism; congregational, presbyterian, and episcopal structures all exist, although a tendency emerged in the 20th century to give the title of bishop to elected leaders of judicatories (synods, districts, churches).

Lutheranism is generally friendly to the Ecumenical Movement, and with some exceptions, Lutheran churches have participated in worldwide gatherings of Christians across confessional and denominational boundaries. Lutherans consider themselves to be both evangelical and catholic because they have points in common with the other Protestant churches on the one-hand, and with Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Anglican Christians on the other. In the ecumenical age, however, they have kept a very distinct identity through their general loyalty to the teachings of 16th century Lutheranism.