

Lutheranism

(Taken from Milton V. Backman, Jr., *Christian Churches of America*)

An individual who played a major role in significantly altering the course of human events was the initiator of the Reformation, Martin Luther. Born in the heart of Germany at Eisleben, Saxony, in 1483, this resolute leader lived during an era when conditions were favorable for a religious upheaval; and his ambition, determination, and faith led him to found what is generally known as the oldest and largest Protestant denomination in the world.

The fact that the Reformation struck so suddenly in so many different parts of Europe is evidence that a deep path leading to this religious revolt had been carved. Undoubtedly there were many complex underlying forces which set the stage for this reorientation of Christian thinking and practice. The spirit of inquiry and the humanistic spirit of the Renaissance emphasized the study of man and his accomplishments and prompted many to seek a new relationship with God. The invention of printing with movable type caused a multiplication of the number of books and a more rapid circulation of ideas; and the translations of the Bible into the vernacular enabled increased numbers to become acquainted with the messages contained therein. Nationalism increased and was coupled with a popularization of mercantilism. Mercantilists concluded that wealth in the form of specie was necessary in order to develop a powerful nation, and that wealth could be secured by exporting more goods and importing less. Since the dominant church sometimes impeded this growth of wealth by channeling money from various states to Rome, economy-minded politicians recognized the advantages of nationalizing the church, thereby diverting the pope's wealth to the treasuries of the state. Moreover, in the fifteenth century many Europeans recognized the apparent abuses in the universal church, became increasingly critical of the clergy, and determined that the church had incorporated into its theology various doctrinal innovations that did not harmonize with biblical teachings. Two additional underlying forces that helped precipitate the Reformation were the peasants' desperate hope for a better world, and an apparent lack of religious zeal among many people. Some loved their country more than they could the religion prescribed in their community. The stage was set for a shattering confrontation between resolute reformers and supporters of the established church.

Martin Luther's devout interest in religion was manifest while he was in his early twenties. Shortly after gaining distinction as a student at the University of Erfurt and receiving a master's degree in 1505, he abandoned his intended interest in the profession of law, forsook his father's desires, and entered a monastery of the Augustinian order at Erfurt.

During his initial years in the monastery, Luther seemed so preoccupied with his own sins that he failed to become alarmed with the abuses which were visible in the church. His celebrated journey to Rome occurred in 1510-1511 and, although this excursion undoubtedly made him aware of the worldliness of many clergymen, this recognition was not the major turning point in his religious career.

Shortly after his appointment as professor of theology at Wittenberg, Luther concluded that salvation comes not through the sacraments, not through the works of man, and not through the church, but is a gift of God which comes to man through hearing and studying the word of God. He decided that this grace manifest through faith justifies man before God. Since such a view could not be suppressed in the mind of an impatient, outspoken critic such as Martin Luther, an irrepressible conflict was approaching between a courageous leader and a powerful church.

Luther was motivated to action after John Tetzel commenced issuing indulgences in more liberal terms than generally offered the people. On the eve of All Saints' Day, October 31 1517, Luther made public his objections to Tetzel's actions by unfolding a manifesto called *Ninety-five Theses*, undoubtedly without realizing the repercussions it would have on the history of mankind. There is no divine authority, Luther announced in these propositions, for preaching that the soul flies out of purgatory immediately after the coins clink into the money chest. His tone remained critical when he insisted that only God can remit sins; he also proclaimed that Christians who conscientiously repent do not need letters of indulgence. Individuals should be taught that people who give to the poor or lend to the needy are engaged in more righteous deeds than are those who purchase indulgences. And he concluded that if the pope had authority to eliminate punishment for those who contributed to worthy projects, why didn't he, for the sake of love and justice, release everyone from purgatory?

After the theses had been printed and circulated throughout Germany, the theological storm erupted, and Luther was instructed to state precisely his position regarding these propositions. When the German monk was interviewed in 1518 by Cardinal Cajetan, the papal legate reminded Luther of a papal decree which had defined the church's position concerning the treasury of merits. This pronouncement had specified that there was a treasury of the surplus merits of Christ, of the Blessed Virgin, and of the saints which was at the disposal of popes for the releasing of the faithful from temporal punishment arising from sins. Believing that the orthodox position concerning this treasury was not in harmony with biblical injunctions, Luther retorted that the pope was not an authority superior to scripture. One year later John Eck, another skilled theologian, arrogantly trapped Luther into confessing that he believed councils could and did err. On that occasion, Luther publicly insisted that, for the sake of scripture, Christians should reject as a source of religious truth the decisions of popes and councils.

During the year following his confrontation with Eck, Luther set the theological tone of this religious revolt in his three famous Reformation treatises. It was during that memorable period that Luther popularized his belief concerning priesthood of believers, justification by the grace of God, two sacraments, and the Bible as the sole standard of faith. Since Luther refused to recant, and continued to preach doctrines which conflicted with the recognized beliefs of the universal church, Pope Leo X excommunicated the Saxon rebel. When

Luther burned this bull of excommunication at Wittenberg on December 10, 1520, he severed all connections with the pope and the Roman Catholic Church.

Luther was granted a final opportunity to recant before the Diet meeting at Worms in 1521. Instead of retreating, however, Luther reiterated his belief that popes and councils had contradicted each other and he also stated that he could not accept their authority in matters of doctrine. "My conscience," he declared, "is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant.... To go against conscience is neither right nor safe.... Here I stand," he concluded. "I cannot do otherwise."³ After being condemned by the emperor and branded a heretic, Luther secured protection from Frederick, Elector of Saxony and, while living for ten months in a secluded castle, worked diligently on a translation of the New Testament from Greek into German.

After translating the New Testament, the next project Luther undertook was to organize a new religious community. This work began in March 1522 at Wittenberg. By reforming the Mass and preparing a new religious service, Luther continued to direct the course of the Reformation. Since he emphasized a degree of spiritual freedom in the emerging Holy Evangelical Catholic Church of Saxony, Luther did not require all his followers to adopt his new liturgy. Nevertheless, he precipitated various schisms by insisting that Christ was actually present during the Lord's Supper. He also prepared a *Shorter Catechism*, which was a brief analysis of the principal doctrines he espoused, and a *Larger Catechism* intended primarily for ministers. Luther's basic teachings were incorporated into the Augsburg Confession. This early exposition of faith, drafted by Philip Melancthon from articles prepared by Luther, was acknowledged by many political leaders in Germany. Before his death in 1546, Luther also completed a translation of the Bible; spread his religious convictions through constant preaching; married Katharine Von Bora, a former nun; became the father of six children; reared several orphaned children; introduced congregational singing; and wrote a number of hymns that have remained popular, including "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," sometimes referred to as "the battle hymn of the Reformation."

From Germany, Lutheranism spread into many other parts of Western Europe. Eventually many members of this faith, especially German and Scandinavian emigrants, settled along the eastern coast of the modern United States. As early as 1619, Lutherans from Denmark celebrated Christmas on Hudson Bay, but these colonists failed to remain in this hostile environment and a few survivors eventually returned to Copenhagen. A few years later, other Lutherans joined the Dutch settlers who established their homes at Fort Orange, near Albany, and on Manhattan Island. Many Lutherans who colonized New Netherlands, however, were compelled to attend services of the Dutch Reformed Church and were prevented from worshipping regularly until after the English occupation in 1664. Meanwhile, the first Lutherans to worship on a permanent basis in America were emigrants from Sweden who founded a settlement in 1638 near the Delaware River at the present site of Wilmington. As new colonies were planted and toleration for Trinitarian Protestants became a reality throughout the English mainland colonies, Lutheranism gained a foothold in other

sections of America. By 1776 there were more than 220 Lutheran congregations in this land, a high percentage located in the Middle Colonies and western Virginia.

One of the major problems encountered by the early American Lutherans was the dire shortage of meetinghouses and ministers. Few ministers accompanied the early immigrants and most of the settlers scattered into the wilderness. Living on isolated farmsteads, most Lutherans failed to unite for religious worship, and a high percentage of former European Lutherans remained without meetinghouses throughout the eighteenth century. This problem created a serious challenge to colonial religious leaders, such as Henry M. Muhlenberg, sometimes known (because of his strenuous efforts to unite members of his faith) as the father of American Lutheranism.

Throughout the nineteenth century, Lutheran ministers labored diligently to provide members of their faith with spiritual leadership and places for worship. The problem was compounded by the explosive expansion of the American population across the continent and the continual arrival of poverty-stricken immigrants along the eastern seaboard. As the nineteenth century drew to a close, more of the uprooted arriving in the United States were of Lutheran heritage than any other Protestant faith. Although this tidal wave of emigration from Lutheran lands to the United States was not as significant as the movement of people from Catholic countries, the Lutheran Church benefited more, numerically speaking, from the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century migrations than did members of any other Protestant faith. After the major problems of shortages of ministers and meetinghouses had been largely solved, Lutheranism emerged in the twentieth century as one of the major Protestant denominations in America.

While Lutherans were striving to provide organized religion for individuals of Lutheran heritage, leaders of the denomination concentrated on promoting unity among their ranks. Various factors, however, contributed toward dividing the Lutherans in America into a number of bodies. Lutherans from various European nations settled in different parts of the new nation, formed different organizations, and were kept apart by contrasting languages and cultures. Problems of transportation and communication also made it difficult for them to work together under one general body.

Another major force which kept Lutherans from uniting was the conflict of their beliefs. Two major kinds of Lutheranism were transplanted to this nation, pietistic Lutheranism and confessional Lutheranism. Pietistic Lutheranism was a form of belief and practice which emphasized experience in the Christian life and championed the importance of Christian action. After being transplanted to colonial America, this emphasis was popularized in the early nineteenth century by Samuel Simon Schmucker (1799-1873). Schmucker rejected not only the traditional view of the real presence of the body and blood of Christ as held by Martin Luther, but also the traditional Lutheran position concerning private confession and the necessity (for all who are granted the opportunity) of baptism for salvation.

Prior to the Civil War, the movement led by Schmucker and other pietistic Lutherans became one of the most formidable forces in the Lutheran Church in America. Many endorsed

only those which they considered to be the essential factors of the Augsburg Confession. Denying the real presence of Christ during the Lord's Supper, many Lutherans advocated that Christ was spiritually received during this sacrament. Rejecting an emphasis on the necessity of baptism for salvation, many insisted that faith alone was essential. Moreover, many denied that man inherited the original sin. They also rejected the traditional belief that man was naturally depraved because of the fall. Many substituted a public confession for a private confession, regarded exorcism as a superstitious rite, and eliminated much of the ritual in the ceremony accompanying the Lord's Supper.

The other major form of Lutheranism that was transplanted to America was confessional Lutheranism, a revival of what many referred to as the traditional form of faith. In the nineteenth century, confessional Lutheranism emerged as a major reaction to the rationalism which was dominating the Lutheran Church in Europe. Proponents of this movement advocated returning to the theology of the confessional period in Lutheran history.

As waves of immigrants arrived in the United States during the latter half of the nineteenth century, confessional Lutheranism became increasingly popular among the American members of this faith. Endowed with a deep appreciation of their religious heritage, these new immigrants vigorously disapproved the pattern of Lutheran church life which had become popular in the early republic. As the twentieth century was ushered in, the more conservative form of Lutheranism became the dominant influence among the members. Although during the past several decades the number of Lutherans in America espousing a reinterpretation of classical Protestantism has increased, most Lutherans in contemporary America are known for their orthodoxy, professing beliefs that represent in nearly all instances concepts popularized by Martin Luther.

Members of this communion have, however, made successful efforts to unite. Linguistic and cultural differences gradually dissipated. Transportation and communication barriers disappeared, and a common religious heritage and recognition of similarities of belief helped many members of this faith to crystallize their organizations. Throughout the past seven decades, there have been many significant realignments and mergers. Whereas there were at one time about 150 Lutheran bodies in the United States, in 1982 approximately 95 percent of all Lutherans belonged to one of three major bodies:

(1) The American Lutheran Church (a moderate body constituted in 1960 by the consolidation of the American Lutheran Church, members who primarily were of German background; the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Norwegian heritage; and the United Evangelical Lutheran Church consisting of many Danish immigrants).

(2) The Lutheran Church in America (the most liberal body, which was formed about 1962 by the merging of the United Lutheran Church in America, the Augustana Evangelical Lutheran Church, the American Evangelical Lutheran Church and the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church).

(3) The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod (organized in

1847, this body is the most orthodox major communion of Lutherans).

Additional realignments of Lutheran bodies have been adopted for the 1980s. After representatives from the American Lutheran Church, the Lutheran Church of America, and the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches voted in 1982 to unite in 1987, they set in motion a plan that will create a church comprising more than 60 percent of all Lutherans in this country. The only major American Lutheran bodies that will remain outside this church of more than 5 million members will be the 2.6 million Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod and the .4 million Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod.

Although most American Lutherans hold that the congregation is the supreme authority in church matters, most congregations have united under synods for mutual assistance and to promote programs that could not be supported effectively by small, independent congregations. In some instances, however, these synods have exercised considerable authority in directing the affairs of local churches.

While about one-third of all Protestants in the world are classified as Lutherans, members of this faith currently constitute the third largest Protestant community in the United States next to Baptists and Methodists. Since World War II Lutherans have also engaged in effective evangelistic activities in this country, and have attracted many who are not of German or Scandinavian descent, thereby changing, in part, the complexion of many congregations. All of the major bodies are also currently known for their emphasis on social welfare programs, world relief agencies, religious film production, aid to immigrants, counseling services to those in need, and various educational programs. Lutherans are among the Protestant leaders in this country who support colleges, theological schools, and parochial elementary schools. Throughout America, children, widows, senior citizens, the handicapped, and others desiring assistance benefit from programs sponsored by people whose religious heritage can be traced back to the successful instigator of the Reformation, Martin Luther.

Distinguishing Beliefs

The following beliefs reflect the historic tradition of the Lutheran Church and are currently held by most Lutherans but generally not by other Protestants.

Lutherans teach that baptism is necessary for salvation for all who are granted the opportunity. They claim, however, that the disposition of those who have not been baptized is unknown. Some emphasize that since only unbelief condemns, unbaptized infants will not be damned nor will they go to limbo. Some also reason that the necessity of baptism is not absolute. Ordinarily, many teach, Christ bestows his grace through baptism.

Another distinctive Lutheran belief is that in the sacrament of Holy Communion, the resurrected Christ imparts himself (his body and blood) to communicants. Although Lutherans reject transubstantiation (the changing of the elements), they believe that communicants receive bread and wine as the

body and blood of Christ. They further hold that only worthy believers (interpreted by many as those having faith, who recognize they are sinners, and who believe they receive the body and blood of Christ) benefit from this sacrament. Nonregular communion is viewed as a sign of spiritual laxity by most members of this church.

According to Lutheran practice, preceding each celebration of the Lord's Supper is a public or private confession and the absolution one receives through this confession is considered part of the sacrament of Holy Communion. Lutheran ministers absolve sins not because they claim special powers but because of their belief in Christ's action. God has commanded, they teach, that ministers may announce to the confessors that their sins are forgiven them through Christ's forgiveness. All sins, they further hold, should be confessed, for small sins, they say, become serious when they are regarded as small. Some Lutheran ministers have departed from absolution as traditionally practiced and say that confession should take the form of pastoral counseling.

Another characteristic Lutheran practice is that ordinarily when a girl or boy reaches the age of fourteen she or he participates in a special service called confirmation. This rite, which is different from most confirmation services that take place in Protestant churches, is normally preceded by two to four years of instruction.

Miscellaneous Beliefs

In addition to the beliefs listed above which are doctrines not accepted by most other Protestants, most Lutherans endorse the classical Protestant belief concerning the Bible as the sole norm of faith, the Godhead, angels, the fall, the atonement, life beyond the grave, and priesthood of believers. Lutherans also continue to emphasize the concept of justification by grace through faith.

Moreover, Lutherans believe that marriage, confirmation, and ordination of the clergy are rites of the church but are not sacraments; for God, they say, has not promised divine grace through these rites.