

Lutheranism

Introduction

It is odd, but a fact, that most British Christians know little or nothing about Lutheranism, despite the Lutheran church being at the centre of the Reformation period and the fact that Martin Luther was the pioneer that instigated the Reformation. More books have been written about Luther than any other person other than the Lord Jesus.

Lutheran churches, though not common in Britain, do have prominent numbers worldwide (80 million) and are very common in America, Germany, and Scandinavia. Thus we ought to know more about them and especially how they differ from evangelical Protestant, Reformed churches.¹

History

Lutheranism began when Martin Luther [1483-1546] nailed his 95 Theses to the Wittenberg church door and prompted the Reformation. His intention was not to start a new denomination, far from it, Martin wanted to purge the German churches of egregious errors and initiate a reformed Catholic church that would be Biblical.

Of course the powers that ruled the Roman Catholic Church would never allow this, especially as Luther directly attacked a revenue stream that was needed to boost Italian riches and expenditure on artworks, sculpture and buildings.² This is to say nothing of the perceived heresy against Catholic dogma that needed purging.

Thus began decades of contention, persecution, debates, political intrigue, assassinations, martyrdoms and wars. The movement initiated by Luther did not get extinguished in its early days (as other reform movements had) because a number of German princes (electors)³ and nobles supported the reform movement.

Gradually, out of necessity, the rebellious German provinces committed to the Protestant doctrine of Luther and turned their previous Catholic churches into a new expression based upon the truths expounded by Luther (founded on the bedrock of justification by faith). Thus the priests were evicted, the altars removed, the decorations and idols burned and a simpler expression of faith began to evolve. Instead of priestly mediators and formal rituals, Lutheran churches were led by scholars that could teach. Indeed, numerous godly

¹ By this I mean Calvinists; thus including Particular Baptists (e.g. John Gill), historic Congregationalists (e.g. John Owen) and Dissenting Independents (e.g. John Bunyan) and not just Presbyterians.

² The sale of indulgences by Grand Commissioner Tetzel in Germany (money for release from purgatory and even future sins) was instigated to raise money for the pope's architecture projects, especially the reconstruction of St Peter's Basilica, though half went to pay off the debt the Archbishop of Mainz (head of the area Tetzel operated in) which he had incurred securing the Archbishopric.

³ Certain German princes elected the emperor and thus were called 'electors'. They were higher than landgraves (a German count).

men emerged that stood side by side with Luther to fight for the Gospel in Europe, such as Georg Spalatin (Burkhardt),⁴ Philip Melanchthon, Martin Bucer and many others.

By 1518 Luther's theology had fully evolved into the five solas (*sola scriptura, sola fide, sola gratia, solus Christus, soli deo gratia*; i.e. Scripture alone, faith alone, grace alone, Christ alone, to the glory of God alone). He also understood clearly the bondage of man's will to sin. Note Thesis 62 (1517), '*The true treasure of the church is the most holy Gospel of the glory and grace of God*'.

Over time, as Luther got older and riddled with various ailments, he began to let the younger Melanchthon [1497-1560] take charge of doctrinal and political matters. Melanchthon's nature was conciliatory (as opposed to Luther's bombastic character) and over time he began to compromise on doctrines that Luther fought for. After Luther's death this compromising attitude worsened as Lutheranism became a compromised religion. Thus the Lutheranism of today (although it is varied) is very different from the Lutheranism in the early days at Wittenberg.

A very concise timeline of Lutheranism

- October 1517: Luther kick starts the Reformation by nailing his reform proposals to the church door at Wittenberg.
- 1521: Diet of Worms (pron. Dyet of Verms). Luther defends his theology in front of the emperor, Charles V. Break with Rome now irrevocable. Luther condemned as a heretic.
- 1521: Luther taken 'captive' in the Wartburg Castle for protection from assassination. Luther was under the protection of the Elector of Saxony, Frederick the Wise. Here he translates the NT into German (published 1522).
- 1522: Luther returns to Wittenberg to organise the church in a conservative fashion as opposed to radical extremists.
- 1524-1525: Peasants Revolt. Luther upholds the right of the authority of the nobles and denies the right to rebel.
- 1525: Luther writes the brilliant '*Bondage of the Will*' as an answer to Erasmus' '*Diatribes on Free Will*' (1524).
- 1525-1529: Controversy with Zwingli about the Lord's Supper. Luther was wrong.
- 1529: Colloquy of Marburg. 14 articles of doctrine were agreed by Luther, Melanchthon, Zwingli, Oecolampadius, Bucer and others. However, the Lord's Supper was not agreed.
- 1529: Luther's '*Large Catechism*' and '*Small Catechism*'.
- 1529: Schwabach Articles. A basic confession of faith written by Luther, Melanchthon and probably Justus Jonas. Material from these were incorporated by Melanchthon into the later Augsburg Confession.
- 1530: Augsburg Confession. The emperor wanted conciliation between Protestants and Catholics. A summary of Lutheran faith presented to Emperor Charles V, written by Luther, Justus Jonas, Bugenhagen and Melanchthon. A draft was composed at Torgau. Melanchthon reworked this document into the Augsburg Confession. Some alterations were made by Luther and others and were supported by various princes. Catholic theologians accepted some of the articles, qualified others but condemned 13. The reply (the '*Papalists Confutation*') became Charles' own confession of faith. The emperor demanded that the Lutherans comply with the '*Confutation*'. Melanchthon replied to it. The reply was later attached to the confession. In 1532 Jonas translated this into German and made it the standard Lutheran confession.

⁴ It was common for scholars that wrote in Latin to use a Latin surname. 'Spalatinus' was derived from 'Spalt' his birthplace.

- 1534: Luther finished translation of whole Bible.
- 1537: *Smalkald Articles*. Prepared for the Smalkald⁵ League.
- 1546: Luther dies.
- 1546-47: Smalkald War. Between the Protestant Smalkald League and the Catholic Empire of Charles V. Protestants defeated. Lutherans ordered to readopt Catholicism, with some minor changes.
- 1548, 15 May: Augsburg Interim.⁶ Attempt by Charles V to unite Lutherans and Catholics. It was a provisional arrangement until the Council of Trent was complete, with some minor external reforms, but the compromise satisfied nobody. Spanish troops forced the Protestants to accept it. [The reaction later led to the defeat of Charles and the peace of Augsburg.] ‘Sola’ omitted from the phrase ‘*sola fide justificamur*’; (i.e. denial of faith only.) Article IV of the later Formula of Concord stated that good works should be removed from the matter of salvation.
- 1548-52: Leipzig Interim. The emperor again tried a settlement and presented this to Saxon princes in December 1548. It was not adopted. Concessions had been made by Melancthon on the ground of necessity, amending the earlier Augsburg Interim. These were about adiaphora (‘things indifferent’, see later). Sadly it included the necessity of good works and the full restoration of the Mass.
- 1552: Peace of Passau. Following the victory of the Protestants under Maurice of Saxony, caused by anger to the imposition of the Augsburg Interim. Charles V guaranteed religious freedom to Lutheran princes. The Augsburg Interim was cancelled. Effectively the emperor surrendered his quest for European religious unity. Imprisoned Lutheran princes were released.
- 1555, September: Peace of Augsburg (aka Augsburg Settlement). Removed the Leipzig Interim (and Augsburg Interim) and made the division of Christendom legal and permanent with the Holy Roman Empire (most of Europe but not France). After Charles was defeated by Protestant princes in Germany (1552) a settlement was negotiated. This accepted the choice of religion in each city, either Lutheran or Catholic (not Calvinist or Anabaptist). Each prince determined the religion of his domain, ‘*Cuius regio, eius religio*’. This cemented the Reformation in political terms; the unity of religion that had prevailed during the Dark Ages and medieval times was gone. This held until the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 when Calvinism was also allowed.⁷
- 1548-1577 Controversies: even in Luther’s lifetime controversies and divisions had arisen over two areas: 1) where he and Melancthon disagreed; 2) where Luther’s thought was less clear and open to discussion. This led to two main parties: 1) the Philippists (followers of Melancthon); 2) Gnesio-Lutherans (‘Genuine Lutherans’, led by Matthias Flacius Illyricus). Philippians were rightly accused of synergism.⁸ This strife led to the demand from princes for a theological settlement.
- 1577: *Formula of Concord*. A confession to settle the controversies raging in the Lutheran church. These controversies were around: Adiaphorism,⁹ Majorism,¹⁰ synergism, free will, conversion, original sin, antinomianism, law and Gospel, the

⁵ Also Schmalkald, Smalcald, Schmalcald.

⁶ ‘*Declaration of his Roman Imperial Majesty on the Observance of Religion within the Holy Roman Empire until the Decision of the General Council.*’ This was ordered at the Diet of Augsburg.

⁷ The series of treaties signed to end the Thirty Years War in Central Europe and the Eighty Years War between Spain and the Dutch Republic. These wars were based on religious conflicts but also included territorial interests and monarchical conflicts.

⁸ Where man co-operates with God in salvation. Arminianism is a synergistic religion.

⁹ ‘Things indifferent’, i.e. things allowed in church services which are not forbidden by Scripture.

¹⁰ George Major [1502-74] taught that good works were necessary for salvation.

Supper, Christ's descent into hell and predestination. It was chiefly drafted by Martin Chemnitz and James Andreae.

- 1580: *The Book of Concord*. Statement of Lutheran belief. It consists of the three ecumenical creeds, the Augsburg Confession and its apology, Luther's catechisms, the Smalkald Articles and the Formula of Concord.
- 16th century: Lutheranism gradually accepted in Scandinavia (Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Estonia, and Latvia), Hungary, & Transylvania.
- 17th century. Lutheranism settled in America.
- 17th century: Pietism. This period saw an over-intellectualised, dogmatic, dead, dry, Aristotelian, over-rationalised scholasticism and no piety. Due to the confusion of multiple Lutheran controversies, doctrinal formalities and deadness and apostasies, the Lutheran Pietists turned to a more informal, interior form of religion based on simplicity, the Bible and good works.
- 17th –18th century: Rationalism. After the Enlightenment, Lutheranism became very infected with Rationalism, especially thinkers from France and England, but also German philosophers Kant and Leibnitz. Biblical principles were jettisoned. Some pastors rose up against this liberalism, such as Johann Melchior Goeze [1717-1786].
- 19th century: revival. After several scholars resisted rationalism, such as Johann Georg Hamann [1730-1788] a revival began known as the *Erweckung* ('Awakening'). Napoleon's invasion of Germany (1806) brought further rationalism and this angered Lutherans who stirred up a desire for revival. This cemented a desire for Luther's theology coupled with Pietism, especially after 1830, called the Neo-Lutheran Movement. Scandinavia was especially affected.
- 18th – 19th century: Lutheran missions took Lutheranism across the globe, spurred on by the revival.
- 19th –20th century. There were various small movements, mostly bad. There were compromises with Catholicism, influences of Marxism, the divine right of kings, new heresies, though there were some revivalist influences calling for orthodoxy.
- 20th century: unbelief. Neo-Lutheranism did not succeed in widespread popular acceptance and did not counter secularism. It was stated in 1969 that '*unbelief is rampant*' within Lutheran churches (Manfried Kober). This is still true today. Apart from isolated cases of Biblicity, most Lutheran churches are as dead and formal as Anglicanism and other liberal, institutional churches.

Problems with Lutheranism

Christology

Lutherans have a peculiar view of ubiquity (omnipresence). They teach that the human nature of the ascended Christ received and exercises the perfections of his divine nature. This is a confusion of natures.

Mass

Luther never got rid of the Mass but reorganised it.

Luther took literally the words, 'This is my body' and 'this is my blood'. Although he denied transubstantiation of the Roman Church (Christ is present in the bread) he replaced it with a similar consubstantiation¹¹ (Christ is present in, with and under the bread, together with

¹¹ Some say that this word is wrong and replace it with the phrase 'Real Presence'. Lutherans generally reject the term 'consubstantiation'.

it). The difference was that Luther ascribed this miracle to the word of God and not to the officiation of a priest. He also affirmed that the bread and wine did not physically change.

Note the Smalcald Articles, '*of the Sacrament of the Altar, we hold that the bread and wine in the Supper are Christ's true body and blood*'.¹²

Liturgy

Luther kept the Roman concept of liturgy with a number of collects, chants and canticles. There were orders for services and a litany, the *Te Deum* and *Magnificat*. In fact, Luther did not significantly change the ecclesiology of the Lutheran church.

Sacraments

Luther reduced the seven Catholic sacraments to two, baptism and the Supper. However, Lutheran orthodoxy teaches baptismal regeneration. The Lutheran Real Presence is also an error.

Law

Lutherans teach both good and bad things regarding law. They strongly affirm a dichotomy between law and grace (Gospel).¹³ However, they fail to see the importance of the moral law contained within the Mosaic Law and the New Covenant, which is eternal and unites the two.

Original sin

The Formula of Concord (Art. 1) denied that original sin was the basic nature of fallen man. The doctrine is complex and results in a kind of dualism. By creation, man's nature is good because it is from God, but man is also corrupt from Adam. The Formula says, '*The nature of man is God's work, original sin is the devil's work. ... the distinction between our corrupt nature and the corruption which is implanted in the nature, and through which the nature is corrupt, can be easily discerned*'. (Art. 1, Affirmative 1 and 2.) Thus man's nature is distinct from the corruption that now resides in it. That is, God creates an uncorrupted, pure soul which, when united with a physical body, that soul becomes corrupt. This is close to Manichaeism¹⁴

They also affirm that natural man has the power to accept grace by ceasing resistance to God.

Election

While the Lutherans affirm election to salvation, they deny reprobation (which is illogical).

Salvation

Lutherans emphasise justification by faith but claim that this has been made for all people. This is a form of universalism similar to Arminianism.

The *Saxon Visitation Articles* (though not an official standard they carry much weight) state that:

- Christ did not die only for the elect.
- Saints can lose their salvation.
- Denial of reprobation.

¹² Smalcald Articles, *The Lutheran Confessions*, Concordia (2005), p305.

¹³ Reformed theologians tend to strongly affirm the unity of these.

¹⁴ A Gnostic church heresy based on dualism. The world has good and evil (which is associated with matter); redemption is the liberation of the good from the evil.

- Affirmation of baptismal regeneration.

Note that Lutherans deny total depravity, limited atonement, irresistible grace and the perseverance of the saints. Though they affirm election, they deny reprobation. Thus Lutherans deny almost all of the doctrines of grace.

Ecclesiology

Lutherans are not uniform in this matter. Some churches are episcopal, some are congregational, and some tend towards presbyterianism. Some are Erastian (connected to the state) others are independent.

Services tend to be ritualistic, retaining much of Catholic liturgy.

The normative principle

This is the opposite of the Calvinist regulative principle, which states that what is not Biblical is forbidden. Lutherans affirm that what is not forbidden is acceptable. Many modern Arminians use this normative principle. Charismatics use it to adopt anything at all.

Summary

Despite Luther's strong affirmation of the fundamental principle of Scripture alone, Lutheranism developed into a sacramentalist church that was close to Rome in ecclesiology and close to Arminianism in soteriology.¹⁵

The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod

This is a confessional form of a Lutheran church but is actually a separate body from mainstream Lutherans formed by migrants to America. It is the second largest Lutheran body (2.1 million members) that was organised in 1847.

German Lutheran immigrants settled in Indiana, Ohio and Michigan during the 1830s and 40s. A missionary named Wyneken gradually brought these together. This was followed by a movement of confessional Lutherans under Martin Stephan in Missouri. Stephan, from Saxony, had reacted against the increasing rationalism, ecumenism and forced unity. Seeking freedom of religion he and a number of followers emigrated to the USA in 1838.

After debates as to whether this was a new church or part of the Lutheran hierarchy in Germany, the leader of the community, CFW Walther, considered the status as being a new, separate church.

In April 1847, twelve pastors representing 14 congregations met in Chicago to found the new church body, 'The German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio and Other States'.

¹⁵ Arminianism: Christ died for everyone; salvation comes by man exercising faith by using free will (Wesleyanism or Evangelical Arminianism – a universal prevenient grace comes first to aid the human will; Continental Arminianism – will comes first, then grace). Lutheranism: Christ died for everyone, justification is for everyone; salvation comes by exercising faith, by free will, and being baptised. These are variations of universalism; the atonement is universal (pure universalism is 'everybody is saved'). Man is sovereign in initiating salvation (synergism). CONTRAST WITH - The Bible teaches that atonement is particular – only for the elect. Faith is a gift from God to the elect after regeneration. God is sovereign (monergism).

This church was conservative, opposing humanism and syncretism. Fellowship was restricted to those who agreed with the doctrines of the Missouri Synod. It was also active in caring for German immigrants, establishing schools and homes; consequently it grew rapidly. In 1872 it joined the Wisconsin, Ohio, Norwegian, Minnesota and Illinois synods forming the 'Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of the North America'.

Originally the community was bilingual, with English being the dominant language from the 1880s. The two world wars helped to decide to drop German services.

In 1947 the denomination was renamed the 'Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod'.

Since then there have been various turbulent controversies and schisms.

The doctrinal emphasis of this church is sola scriptura, affirming Biblical inerrancy. It also upholds the Book of Concord; ministers swear to uphold this confession. In many respects it is evangelical and Reformed. Its congregational polity makes it more like dissenting Congregationalism. It is also amillennial. However, it affirms the Real Presence in the Supper.

Conclusion

Frankly, Martin Luther would be aghast at what the Lutheran Church turned out to be today, apart from the Missouri-Synod.

Many of the key affirmations of Luther, doctrines that he fought for all his life, have been either abandoned or compromised, beginning with Melancthon's accessions.

In salvation, modern Lutherans are similar to Arminians. However, they also hold a virtual Catholic idea of the Lord's Supper and baptismal regeneration.

In practice, most modern Lutheran churches are just as apostate as the Church of England. They are mostly liberal and godless.

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