

THE SURVIVAL OF TRUE LUTHERANISM (A Brief Overview)

*By Pastor William P. Terjesen
(Written in the mid-1990s)*

Confessional Lutherans can sometimes get discouraged. It seems so often that pure, unadulterated Christianity is about the last thing people want, even fellow Lutherans. Even in a conservative, confessional church body like the Missouri Synod huge numbers of pastors and people apparently have little interest in true Lutheranism, but are fascinated to the point of perspiration over un-Lutheran worship forms, the charismatic movement, Promise Keepers, and mainline, middle-of-the-road, white bread, American Protestantism. To such people, we confessionally minded people seem like spoil-sports and stick-in-the-muds. We are not advocating anything other than faithfulness to our synod's historic, biblically based doctrinal stance, but people who advocate other agendas find this to be a nuisance. It can sometimes feel like a lonely world.

But our time is not the first time that genuine Lutheranism has been threatened from within by Lutherans advocating un-Lutheran doctrines and practices. There have been numerous times in the history of the Lutheran Church that confessional Lutheranism has teetered on the brink only to rise again with new vigor. Knowing that this has happened, and how it has happened, can help confessional Lutherans make sense of the problems in the modern Lutheran context, and assure us that our cause is not lost.

Dr. Martin Luther, professor at the University of Wittenberg and leader of the Reformation, saw already throughout the 1530's and 40's that many of his colleagues at the University were secretly out of sympathy with his doctrines. He even saw changes in the theology of his close friend and associate Philip Melanchthon that did not bode well for the future. While he lived, none of these men dared to come out in the open with their deviations. But Luther believed that after he died Lutheranism would suffer a grievous blow from within; that the true Word of God would be compromised by some of his colleagues. There was a strong pull in the direction of making peace with, and finding unity with both Rome and the Reformed (Calvinist) churches. Melanchthon and other members of the Wittenberg faculty began secretly "adjusting" their theology to make this unity and peace more of a possibility. They moved secretly to a more Calvinistic stance on the Lord's Supper (denial of the Real Presence), and evinced a growing indifference to doctrinal deviations. There also grew among them the idea that there is something good in man that contributes toward his salvation (synergism).

After Luther died Melanchthon and his followers (known as Philippists) began to increase the advocacy of their deviations, all the while pretending to represent true Lutheranism and the spirit of Luther. (For example, Melanchthon continuously altered the Augsburg Confession to agree with his changing theology. This is why Lutherans accept only the Unaltered Augsburg Confession of 1530 as genuine. Melanchthon's later altered Augsburg Confession was so unLutheran that even John Calvin could subscribe to it.) The "Lutheranism" they advocated was a unionistic Lutheranism ready to enter more readily into fellowship with the Reformed, and to compromise doctrine for the sake of Christian unity. The genuine Lutheranism of Luther, of the Augsburg Confession and its Apology (defense), of the Large and Small Catechisms and the Smalcald Articles, was in danger of being replaced by a toned down, "kinder, gentler" counterfeit. Because of Melanchthon's popularity in Germany and elsewhere as the successor of Luther, the Philippists might have succeeded in altering Lutheranism forever had it not been for another group of theologians who arose to confront and condemn the deviations of the Philippists and reassert the genuine teachings of Luther.

This group of theologians who opposed Philippism became known as the Gnesio-Lutherans (meaning Genuine Lutherans) because of their desire to remain faithful to the teachings of Luther and the early Lutheran Confessions. These two groups engaged in a protracted battle for the soul of Lutheranism. If the Philippists were underhanded and secretive about their deviations, the Gnesio-Lutherans were vociferous and polemical in their methodology. Finally, one of the Gnesio-Lutherans came to the fore, whose doctrine was unquestionably orthodox, but whose temperament was more gentle and irenic. His name was Martin Chemnitz. Because of this difference in temperament from other Gnesio-Lutherans, Chemnitz has often been viewed as the leader of a third, middle party between the Gnesio's and the Philippists, but this is inaccurate.

Chemnitz's closest friends and associates were found among the Gnesio-Lutherans, and his theology was in full, enthusiastic agreement with their position. He was not a theological moderate.

Chemnitz was a man of immense learning, orthodoxy and piety. He rose to a position of great influence and is, to this day, considered to be second in the Lutheran Church only to Martin Luther himself. This estimation is borne out by the quality of his theological writings. It was Chemnitz (along with other Gnesio-Lutherans like Jacob Andrae, Nicholas Selnecker, David Chytraeus, Andrew Musculus and Christopher Koerner) who gave the Lutheran Church "The Formula of Concord", and with it the completed "Book of Concord" of 1580. The publication of these documents had the effect of galvanizing and uniting Lutherans under the banner of Lutheran orthodoxy and sounded the death knell for Philippism (at least for the time being). They also ushered in the Age of Lutheran Orthodoxy (1580-1700 approx.), considered by some to be the high water mark of Christian theology. The great theologians of the age of Lutheran Orthodoxy other than Chemnitz, were, Leonhard Hutter (d. 1616), Johann Gerhard (d. 1637), Nikolas Hunnius (d. 1643), Abraham Calov (d. 1686). Others included Johann Koenig, Johann Quenstedt, Johann Wilhelm Baier and David Hollaz. During this time, Gnesio-Lutheranism, that is, orthodox, confessional Lutheranism flourished.

Then, in approximately 1700 or so Pietism arose as a reaction of certain Lutherans against what they considered to be "dead orthodoxy". Pietism says that heartfelt faith is more important than doctrine. Whatever good intentions they may have had, the Pietists made doctrine subservient to Christian experience and feelings, and reintroduced Philippistic compromises regarding human cooperation in regeneration, and an increasingly Calvinistic understanding of the Lord's Supper. Pietism was indifferent to purity of doctrine and so unionistic practices between Lutherans and non-Lutherans became normal. Pietism was a wildly popular movement which had a devastating effect on confessional Lutheranism. These effects, and the effects of another concurrent movement known as Rationalism, again brought orthodox Lutheranism to the brink of extinction except for a few die-hards here and there.

Just when we might have expected orthodox Lutheranism to fold, a confessional renewal began in Europe in the 1800's led by men like Von Hofmann, Harless, Hoefling, Von Zeszschwitz, Thomasius, Philippi and others. The rise of Martin Stephan was a part of this renewed interest in genuine Lutheranism. He and his followers had to contend with the rationalism and pietism of the Lutheran church of their homeland, as did others like Wilhelm Loehe and Grabau. Stephan and his followers decided to emigrate to the U.S. where they settled in Missouri and eventually became the Missouri Synod under the leadership of C.F.W. Walther. Note: The Missouri Synod came into existence as a repudiation of pietism and rationalism and as a decidedly orthodox Lutheran church. The Missouri Synod saw itself as fully in harmony with Luther, Chemnitz, Gerhardt, Baier, and other orthodox Lutherans, and demanded of its members full, unreserved, "quia" subscription to the Book of Concord, and still does. It was a self-consciously Gnesio-Lutheran church body.

The existence of the Missouri Synod is not the only result of the confessional Lutheran revival of the 1800's, but it is one of the most prominent. And in America it led the way in a full-fledged renaissance of orthodox Lutheranism the effects of which can still be seen today. For the most part the Lutheranism that already existed in America when Walther and the Saxons arrived in the 1830's, was flabby, pietistic and liberal. There was very little interest in the Catechisms, the Confessions, etc., but a lot of interest in being like other American protestants. Walther and the Missouri Synod attracted Lutheran minded people from all over America with their periodicals "Der Lutheraner" and "Lehrer und Wehrer", and through this work confessional Lutheranism in America grew. It is also interesting to note that while other Lutheran denominations grew in the 20th century by means of mergers, the Missouri Synod never merged with anyone, yet grew by the power of its confessional Lutheran message to be the second largest Lutheran denomination in North America despite several splinter groups that departed. The existence of the Missouri Synod represents a significant triumph of Gnesio-Lutheranism in modern times, and when she is true to herself, the Missouri Synod is self-consciously Gnesio-Lutheran.

But those Philippists, like the Old Adam, do keep popping up, and in the years following the second world war, Philippistically minded people arose in the Missouri Synod advocating a "kinder, gentler" Lutheranism with room for diverse religious opinion. Throughout the 1950's and 60's this spirit expressed itself in a growing abandonment of our doctrine and practice of church fellowship, and a growing Zwinglian understanding of the Lord's Supper including the widespread practice of open communion (which is a denial of the Real Presence). Pastors trained at the seminary at St. Louis in liberal, historical criticism, increasingly failed to catechize their laity in doctrine resulting in the current catechetical crisis. And like the

Philippists of old, the modern Philippists advocated their "moderate" Lutheranism with assurances that they were orthodox followers of Luther.

In the early 1970's a beginning was made in dealing with this Philippistic spirit, which resulted in the departure from the Synod of many professors, pastors, and congregations. However, a greater number of people who sympathized with the departed, remained in the synod and have been a continuing source of pressure in the direction of unionism, open-communion, un-Lutheran liturgical diversity, women's ordination, the charismatic movement, a functionalist, hire and fire view of the ministry, lay "ministers" preaching and administering the sacraments, and what have you. And since not a few of these modern Philippists are well placed on boards, commissions, and in various offices, our Synod is seriously divided into two groups who neither like nor trust each other. On the local level, congregations used to a generation of "kinder, gentler" Lutheranism resent the young orthodox pastors coming out of our seminaries advocating a return to proper doctrine and practice, and these beleaguered fellows soon learn that they can expect little support from older fellow pastors or from district personnel. Meanwhile, our people, travelling from congregation to congregation are scandalized by the wildly diverse practices they encounter in a Synod that prides itself on its strong doctrinal stance. Orthodox laymen are offended and grieved to discover pastors who have little sympathy at all for our historic practices and who come into congregations and force feed the people with the latest fads of Philippism.

We live in a time when it is easy for a confessional Lutheran to become discouraged and to feel that the cause is lost. I am sometimes discouraged to the point of tears. At such times, however, it is good to remind ourselves, that our time is not the only time that genuine Lutheranism has been brought to the brink; that brethren in past history knew the frustration we know now. It is also good to remind ourselves that God's Word will not fall to the ground. Lutheranism was nearly given up for lost several times already and has come back in full voice to bear its faithful witness. And while it may not always be obvious to us in the trenches, we are in the midst of a world-wide confessional Lutheran revival. The coffin is far from being nailed shut! We have the Word of God, our confessions, and our rich liturgical heritage. We stand shoulder to shoulder with great men like Martin Luther, Martin Chemnitz, Johann Gerhard and C.F.W. Walther. And our God delights in bringing life out of death and displaying His strength in our weakness.