

Christian Discipleship 105: Church History

Lutheranism after Luther (1546-1580)

The notes pertaining to 1546-1580 below draw from *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions* (2006), Concordia Publishing House; pages 443-459

Martin Luther died on February 18, 1546, at 62 years of age. It is very interesting that Luther was born and died in the same small town, Eisleben. This is despite the fact that he actually spent little of his life there.

How did the death of Martin Luther present an opportunity for the religious and political opponents on the Reformation? While politics and power played a role in all of this, what is the most vital thing at stake?

It is important to remember that even after all that Luther and the Reformers had done, the work of the Reformation could have been undone.

Charles V entered a secret agreement with the pope to crush the Lutheran territories in Germany (again, we are speaking broadly when we say "Germany" at this time as it was not one singular country).

The **Smalcaldic War** broke out. The war went very badly for the Lutherans. The forces of the Lutheran Princes were defeated at the Battle of Muhlberg on April 24, 1547. Armies of the Holy Empire advanced on Wittenberg itself, which surrendered without a fight. Charles V, to his credit, refused his soldiers desire to dig up Luther's remains and burn them.

Militarily, the forces of Roman Catholicism and the Holy Roman Empire had won. However, they soon realized that victory on the battlefield would not change the people's hearts. Luther's Biblical teachings had taken root. The only way to eliminate them would be a bloodbath of civilians and clergy. Not surprisingly, Charles V took a more diplomatic route.

The **Augsburg Interim** was issued on May 15, 1548. This proposed a compromise system. The Lutheran Churches would be able to continue to meet and keep some of their practices like giving both consecrated bread and wine to the laity. However, they had to restore some Roman Catholic customs and acknowledge the pope to be the head of the Church. They would have to accept transubstantiation and not proclaim justification by faith alone.

What were the Lutherans to do?

Some Lutherans vowed to not follow the Augsburg Interim, no matter what. It was brutally enforced with 400 pastors being shipped off to prison, laymen jailed and killed, and others fled into exile. The Elector of Saxony, **John Frederick (the Magnanimous)** stood firm, refusing to cave even while imprisoned. Others were willing to negotiate and compromise as they thought

this was the only way to “save” the Reformation. Sadly, **Philip Melanchthon** Luther’s right-hand man and heir apparent, led this faction. They drafted a compromise document called the **Leipzig Interim**. It sought to reclaim more Lutheran practices than allowed under the Augsburg Interim, but was purposely vague on several key doctrines.

Lutherans were now divided into camps opposing or supporting the Interim. Those that favored the path of negotiation and compromise of Melanchthon were called “Philippists” and those that took a hardline of no-compromise the “Gnesio-Lutherans” (meaning genuine). This period of controversy carried in the 1570s.

Most of the common people were on the side of the those who wanted to stand firm and not compromise. **Elector Maurice**, who had taken power after John Frederick was imprisoned, eventually turned on his once allies of Melanchthon and Charles V. He realized public opinion in Saxony was against him and he wanted to stay in power. Maurice was able to drive the Empire’s forces out in 1552. Rome and the Empire began to realize that the spirit of the Reformation could not be broken. They would have to accept that there were areas of Europe that would never be under Papal authority again anytime soon. The treaties of **Passau (1552) and Augsburg (1555)** were landmark actions in terms of religious practice in Europe. They established the principle of whoever ruled a territory would be able to establish either Protestantism or Catholicism as the official religion in their territory. Furthermore, any dissenters would have the opportunity to peacefully emigrate to another territory.

Now the battle for the “soul” of Lutheranism was a theological one. A third group arose to chart a path devoid of both the compromising nature of the Philippist and the combativeness of the Gnesio-Lutherans (who had begun to fall into some error themselves). They were led by Jacob Andreae and **Martin Chemnitz**, and Nicholas Selnecker would also make important theological contributions. Martin Chemnitz is often called the “Second Martin” as he wrote extensively and profoundly in standing firm in the Biblical doctrines of the Reformation.

What was really needed was a collection of Confessional documents. What did Lutherans believe? What did they reject? What does the Bible teach us? To make a long story shorter, this is what the faithful Lutheran theologians worked on during the 1570s. On June 25, 1580 **The Book of Concord** was published. From that point forward (and this continues to this day in many church bodies like the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod), Lutheran pastors would be required to unconditionally subscribe to the Holy Bible and the Lutheran Confessions as a correct doctrinal exposition of the Scripture. The Book of Concord includes 11 documents: the three ancient ecumenical creeds, the Augsburg Confession and its Apology (defense), the Smalcald Articles, Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, the Small and Large Catechisms, and the Formula of Concord (Epitome and Solid Declaration).

The important work that God had done through Martin Luther had been preserved! It was not easy, but by God’s hand using firm and Spirit-filled leaders the truth would continue to go forth.

What happened next? Late 16th- Mid 19th Centuries

A (very brief) highlighting of Lutheran History (especially in Germany) after the Book of Concord is adopted.

In the areas of Germany that were ruled by Lutheran princes (remember that many parts of what is today, especially in the southern regions, remained Roman Catholic) a time known as **“The Age of Orthodoxy”** began. This lasted for almost 200 years. We don’t want to look back with “rose colored glasses”, but overall this time was a good one for Confessional Lutheran theology. Many faithful Lutherans lived, worked, and died knowing the truth of the Scripture and hearing sermons that upheld the truths that Luther and others had fought so hard for.

Some, however, were unsatisfied with certain aspects of religious life. They saw what was going on as too routine and not really calling individual Christians to a more personal commitment to the faith. They dubbed it “dead orthodoxy”. Johann Arndt (1555-1621) wrote devotional writings which sought to offer practical insights into daily living as well as doctrine. **The Pietist Movement** would begin, and the publication of a short book called Pious Desires by a Frankfurt Pastor **Philippi Jakob Spener** in 1675 would popularize the movement. Note: The Pietists were similar to the Methodists that arose in the Church of England in certain ways. To be fair, the Pietists made some accurate observations and positive contributions. For example, they believed that Christians should study the Bible together, not only listen to sermons. However, there were some aspects that certain pietists took too far. They tended to be more of a focus on personal holiness to the point of where it can cause division and veer into legalism. Pietism also tended to be more emotive and experience driven. It also more readily adopted ideas and practices from other Protestant groups.

The Enlightenment was gaining steam in Europe by the 18th Century (we will talk more about it later) and was causing people to question some traditional ideas about the Christian faith. It gained traction in Lutheran areas as well. Some Lutheran theologians began to take a more liberal bent. Furthermore, political leaders began to move away from a strict adherence to the Biblical and Confessional foundations of Lutheranism. As we have learned, when the state and church are “married”, it often eventually has negative effects on faithful Christians.

In 1817 King Frederick William III of Prussia ordered the Lutheran and Reformed Churches to worship together under the umbrella of “Protestants”. This became the model among the German states. There would be Roman Catholics and then there would be Protestants (which this system still operates in the state churches of Germany today). In the Age of Orthodoxy such a union of Lutherans and Calvinists (Reformed) would be unthinkable. Now Lutherans would essentially be forced to worship and commune with those who shared significantly different beliefs, especially in terms of the Lord’s Supper.

There was also a “Confessional Revival” taking root in Germany in the late 18th and early 19th Centuries. It was a reaction against the rationalism of the Enlightenment and “unionism” that was being forced on Protestants. Many of those that stood firm on the Confessional teachings of the Scripture brought forward by the Lutheran fathers were discriminated against and

persecuted (remember the state and church were together). Some of these people would end up leaving Germany in search of a place where they could practice the faith freely. We will learn more about that later in the class (as you may guess this is where the LCMS comes from), and also return to other challenges that would impact Christianity from people who wanted to depart from the historic Christian faith.