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# "A Basic History of Lutheranism in America"\*

By L. W. SPITZ

**A**bdel Ross Wentz, the author of this book, may be regarded as the dean of historians of the Lutheran Church in America. Among the significant contributions to the history of Lutheranism in this country is his *Lutheran Church in American History*, the precursor of the present volume. His *History of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Maryland* and *The Beginnings of the German Element in York County, Pennsylvania*, have set a pattern for other historians, demonstrating the kind of work that must be done elsewhere before a final and comprehensive history of Lutheranism can be written. The same may be said for his interesting *History of the Gettysburg Theological Seminary*, parts of which every Lutheran school boy should know. How many pupils know that the famous Seminary Ridge in the Battle of Gettysburg is named after a Lutheran seminary and that the seminary was used for a hospital by the Confederate army? The marks are still there. Blood stains on books used for pillows may help one to understand why a God-fearing surgeon wrote a prayer for peace on one of the flyleaves. But to return to the author of *A Basic History*, Dr. Wentz writes with a deep love of the Lutheran Church; but he does not permit his heart to prejudice his judgment. He is a historian, aiming to maintain the objectivity of his guild as far as that is humanly possible. Every historian knows, of course, that his objectivity is conditioned to some extent by his own past and present environment.

This volume is to serve a twofold purpose. The author says: "It is intended to furnish an introduction to the history of the Lutheran Church and Lutheran people in America. In this sense it is basic. It aims not merely to present facts but also to present an interpretation of the general course of events in such a way as to prevent the reader from losing the main thread in a webbed mass of details. At the same time it is intended to point the way for the more advanced student to carry his studies into greater detail and even into lines of special research." (Page v.)

To enable the advanced student to do this, he has added a general bibliographical note, in which he discusses significant publications on the history of Lutheranism in America preceding his own works. Comments are offered on the works of Ernest L. Hazelius, Edmund Jacob Wolf, A. L. Graebner, Henry Eyster Jacobs, George J. Fritschel, J. L. Neve, and

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\* For another review of this volume see *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, XXVII (January 1956), 67 f.



F. Bente—a galaxy of great Lutheran writers. The selective bibliography on each chapter of his book covers twenty-three pages of authoritative materials. The student will thank the author for sixteen additional pages in the detailed index.

Dr. Wentz does not apologize for the presence of the Lutheran Church on American soil. What he has to say of Lutherans in this country should have been read by many misguided American patriots during World War I, when some annoyed Lutheran citizens and damaged Lutheran churches. Some Americans had to be told that the German Kaiser was not a Lutheran, nor had the rulers of Prussia been Lutheran for the past three hundred years. He says: "The position of the Lutheran church in America rests upon a birthright. It is not an immigrant church that needed to be naturalized after it was transplanted from some European land. It is as old as the American nation and much older than the American republic. The Lutheran church in America is an integral and potent part of American Christianity. The people in the Lutheran churches of the land are a constituent and typical element of the American nation." (Page v.)

This birthright of the Lutheran Church in America has far-reaching implications. Church history cannot be presented in an ecclesiastical vacuum, isolated from the mundane forces about it. Dr. Wentz reminds the reader that the reciprocal relation between American culture and the American Lutheran Church can be properly understood only in the light of the historical perspective. "There is a reciprocal relation," he says, "between nationality and religion, between the political and the ecclesiastical history of a country." Inasmuch as America is more or less merely a westward extension of Europe, the history of American churches cannot be written without due notice of the religious climate of that continent as well. America has been called the melting pot of people. To some extent it has been that also of churches. Melting pots seethe with great heat. The boiling metal casts off its dross. There are times when the dross is more obvious than the pure metal. This has also been true of Lutheranism in America. The dross of doctrinal impurities at times threatened to cover and obscure the precious metal of confessional Lutheranism, but God never lost sight of the metal.

The New World came into contact with Lutheranism before anyone spoke of a Lutheran Church. Indians from Mexico were present at the Diet of Worms—Cortez's gift to an unappreciative and ungrateful king! The Huguenots massacred by the Spaniards in Florida were murdered not as Frenchmen but as Lutherans. Lutherans celebrated Christmas on the frozen shore of Hudson Bay before the Pilgrim Fathers settled at Plymouth. But permanent settlements of Lutherans in the New World are of a later date. However, when once they appear in larger numbers, they are there to stay. Thus the history of Lutheranism in the New World begins about the time when Peter Minuit bought Manhattan Island from



the Indians for the price of a couple of Indian blankets, and it extends to the present, when the Lutheran Church has grown to become the fourth-largest denomination on this continent.

If the question were asked why Germany did not establish Lutheran colonies, as Spain and France established Roman Catholic and England Puritan ones, history gives the obvious answer. The Netherlands, once a part of the Holy Roman Empire, were drenched with the blood of their martyrs. They recovered, however, and turned their eyes to the Far East and to America. Germany had her internal problems and the Turks to the southeast besides. There was a Smalcald War. The Religious Peace of Augsburg, which ended it, left Germany a divided country. The Thirty Years' War ravaged and decimated the nation.

But even before that destructive war broke out, the Dutch were on the Hudson River. Soon Lutherans came to New Amsterdam. They were neither welcomed by Peter Stuyvesant nor made to feel at home. The obstinate old governor refused to heed the pleas of the Lutherans for freedom of worship as well as the orders of his home authorities. The ruthless oppression of the Protestants by the Duke of Alba in the previous century failed to make him more considerate. Lutherans were not permitted to keep their own pastor. Not until the Roman Catholic Duke of York took over that lucrative fur-trading center at the mouth of the Hudson, now to be known as New York, did the situation of the Lutherans improve. It was a blessing that the Duke's church was a minority church in England, not very popular at the time, so that he granted privileges to other minority groups, because he hoped to have them extended to his own. History does not credit the Duke with a penchant for liberty as such.

Lutherans now had a foothold in the New World, precarious as it was. They were outnumbered by Calvinists. But the permanence of Lutheranism in the New World is symbolized by old St. Matthew's Congregation, which was founded in 1664, the year of the conquest of New Amsterdam by the Duke of York.

The bloody Battle of Lützen, so important to the Lutheran forces in the Thirty Years' War, deprived them of their great leader, King Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden. One can only speculate how Lutheranism in America would have been affected if the king had lived. The king's dream of a Swedish, that is to say Lutheran, settlement in the New World was realized six years after his heroic death, when Axel Oxenstierna established New Sweden on the Delaware. Colonies are seldom founded solely for religious reasons; frequently commercial interests are uppermost in the minds of the founders. One might contrast the motives of the Jamestown founders with those of the Plymouth colonists. Likewise individual emigrants often leave the homeland merely for a better living. The most general cause of migration to America was economic pressure in the old country. Henry C. Brokmeyer, who became influential in St. Louis politics



in the nineteenth century, put it thus in his book, *A Mechanic's Diary*: "Well, hunger brought me here, whatsoever agency it may have had in bringing other people." The type of companies that initiated colonization in the seventeenth century points to commercial interests, supported by the economic needs of the colonists. Added to this there was probably the noble purpose of spreading the culture of the homeland. The Swedes, on their part, regarded religion as a salient part of their culture; pride in their language was another. Doubtless there were God-fearing men whose concern was chiefly for the salvation of immortal souls. Thus there were those among the Swedes who were eager to keep the colonists in the true Lutheran faith and to bring that faith to the Indians. The Swedish government supplied the pastors for the American venture, even after the English had taken over the Swedish settlements; when, however, the younger generation no longer spoke Swedish, it lost interest. Whatever the cause may have been, the famous Gloria Dei and Old Swedes churches, as well as others, fell to the Protestant Episcopal Church. The Swedes often receive prominent mention as an example of defection from Lutheranism, because an entire area was absorbed by another church; one may wonder, however, how many millions of Lutherans were lost to other faiths or became unchurched because the Lutheran Church could not supply a sufficient number of pastors or failed to meet the language problem in time.

The Peace of Westphalia ended the Thirty Years' War, but not the wars of that century. The boundless ambitions of Louis XIV continued to disturb Europe for decades thereafter. Lutherans and others suffering from the depredations of war and religious oppression sought refuge and food in the New World. Proprietors looking for settlers on their land grants invited them to come over. Rosy descriptions of life in the New World were circulated to entice settlers. The influence Gottfried Duden's famous *Report* had in drawing Germans, including the Saxon pilgrims of 1839 to Missouri, is well known. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Georgia, and other colonies were the beneficiaries of numerous migrations. Lutheran indentured servants added to the number of the newcomers. Not all Lutherans remained faithful to their church, but many did. They met for public worship. Pastors arrived to serve them — some good, others not so good. Some clerical renegades from Europe, posing as Lutheran pastors, managed to deceive the people. How were congregations to tell the good from the bad? The country was sparsely settled. Congregations were small and miles apart. Roads were few and bad. It is not surprising that church membership, including all denominations, was at a low ebb at the turn of the eighteenth century.

The eighteenth century brought new problems, but also new opportunities. Pietism brought a new zeal for evangelization but also indifference to pure doctrine. This indifference was to grow into rationalism.



That was the sad state of religion in Europe; it set a pattern for America. In the New World, however, every Old World pattern was subject to various modifications. Lutheranism was exposed to the influence of its Calvinistic environment. Lutherans and Reformed, at some places on the frontier, worshiped in the same churches. Economy dictated such accommodations. Pietism was more harmful than such economy. It watered down confessional Lutheranism. Perhaps it redeemed itself, however, by sending a man to America who was there to become the patriarch of Lutheranism. August Hermann Francke of Halle chose Henry Melchior Muhlenberg to serve the Lutheran Church in America. Muhlenberg's policy was *Ecclesia plantanda*, and he planted well. Under great difficulty he began to gather Lutherans into congregations, and congregations into larger units by encouraging the formation of ministeriums. He established the first one himself. As a German, Muhlenberg might have said: "Aller Anfang ist schwer." Whether he said it or not, the fact is that the organization of the Lutheran Church in the colonies was difficult. If we remember how hard it was to unite the thirteen states into a United States after the Revolutionary War, we can understand why it was not easy to unite widely scattered ministers into a ministerium. The spirit of sectionalism, not to mention the difficulties in communication, was not confined to political areas. With regard to Lutheranism it must be remembered that Lutherans came from various countries or provinces, having different liturgies, using different hymnbooks, often being served by poorly trained pastors who got their ministerial knowledge and skills by the apprenticeship method.

Doctrinal differences and indifference imported from the mother churches in Europe did not improve matters. Differences did not disappear by migration to the New World. There were times when not much more was left of Lutheranism in some communities than the name. Even some prominent clergymen were not ready to subscribe to the Augsburg Confession. Worse than that, Unitarianism, which paganized much of New England Calvinism, also crossed the borders of the Lutheran Church, though only on a very limited scale. In view of these varied circumstances under which the Lutheran Church was planted on American soil and existed there for many years of colonial and frontier life, it is a miracle of God's grace that it not only survived but also grew both internally and externally, until today it is the third-largest Protestant Church in America. Hans Jürgen Baden correctly states: "Man kann, scharf gesagt, kein Stück Geschichte beschreiben, ohne zu berücksichtigen, dass Gott der Urheber der Geschichte ist und dass alles Geschehen in seinem Willen urständet" (*Der Sinn der Geschichte*, p. 15). Viewing God's blessing upon the Lutheran Church in America, we, too, can exclaim: "What hath God wrought!"

The founding of the Gettysburg seminary in 1826 marks an epoch in the history of the Lutheran Church in America. It presaged better times,



for it set off a chain reaction which resulted in the founding of numerous Lutheran seminaries in this country. It should also be remembered that the General Synod placed the Gettysburg seminary on the basis of subscription to the Augsburg Confession by declaring: "In this seminary shall be taught, in the German and English languages, the fundamental doctrines of the Sacred Scriptures as contained in the Augsburg Confession." If that was not enough, it was something. As a matter of fact, it was much. It was more than some Lutherans both here and abroad were willing to subscribe to. At this point one might meditate at length on the blessing the Lutheran Confessions have been for the unity of the Lutheran Church throughout the world.

A flood of immigrants pouring into this country during the second half of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth brought showers of blessing and clouds of problems to the Lutheran Church. C. F. W. Walther and his conservative Lutherans had already arrived. Of him the author says: "From 1839 to his death in 1887 the history of Missouri Lutheranism is closely identified with the story of Walther's life, and he takes his place with Muhlenberg, Schmucker, and Krauth in the quartet of the most outstanding personalities in the history of the Lutheran Church in America" (page 117). Other like-minded Lutherans were already present or soon to come. The story is too immense and too complex to be summarized in a few paragraphs. Synods—German, Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, Slovak—were founded, combined, divided, recombined with others—the boiling of the melting pot! Harsh things were said; heartbreaking actions taken. Where men of conviction differ, that will happen. Since also theologians are sinners, the truth is not always spoken in love. Hence we pray: "Kyrie eleison!" But in spite of strife, which was not confined to the Lutheran Church, the nineteenth century was a magnificent century for the Lutheran Church both at home and abroad. What building of churches, of schools, of charitable institutions! What zeal for missions!

But bigger and better things were still to come. The twentieth century has seen new miracles of Lutheran growth both in America and abroad. The Lutheran Church of richly blessed America has made use of its opportunity to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to give shelter to the homeless, and to preach the Gospel to the lost. There have been renewed efforts to unite Lutherans on the basis of the Lutheran Confessions as a true exhibition of the truth of Holy Scripture. Here, too, God has not withheld His blessings.

What about the future? Honest men will not deny that there are still serious differences in doctrine and practice dividing the Lutheran Church. God-fearing men will face these differences with courage and resolution. The power of God's Word will give them courage; the Lord's will that His people should be like-minded will strengthen their resolution to work

for unity, no matter what the odds. Their zeal will be stimulated by the conviction that God's Holy Spirit is the omnipotent God, who still works miracles today, as He did on the Day of Pentecost.

The readers of Dr. Wentz's book will not all react alike to it; they could not. The very differences among Lutherans which he depicts make it impossible. Each reader will react in accordance with his own conviction. But whatever the reader's personal reaction may be, he should thank Dr. Wentz for helping us to see and to understand some of the problems that have faced the Lutheran Church in America in the past and are facing it today. To know all will not make one condone all, but at least it will help one understand all. A sincere study of the history of the Lutheran Church in America will encourage every Lutheran to continue to pray: "Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," including in these petitions the Lord's blessing on His church; and in view of the Lord's blessing in the past such a study will move him to give thanks unto the Lord because He is good and His mercy endures forever. Dr. Wentz's book may well inspire the reader to proceed to such a study.

St. Louis, Mo