

Sharing Jesus from Generation to Generation

As Good Shepherd celebrates its anniversary, this is the 3rd in a series of articles on church history.

A History of the Lutheran Church

In 1505, a young German Roman Catholic responded to his soul's struggle with the guilt of sin by becoming a monk and a priest. As his struggle continued, he became Professor of Bible at the University of Wittenberg. Through his study of the Bible, this monk, Martin Luther, finally discovered in the gospel the peace with God for which he had been searching.

The turmoil was only beginning. Along with other tensions in the Church and society, the sale of "indulgences" promising forgiveness for the living and the dead provoked opposition. On October 31, 1517, Luther posted for debate 95 statements about repentance and forgiveness. This is considered the birthday of the protestant reformation. At the same time, however, it became apparent only slowly, and to Luther's dismay, that the church had moved far from the teachings of scripture and was abusing its powers. Luther worked for change through his many writings, including a popular translation of the Bible into German, the "Small Catechism" – a summary of Christianity for lay people – and a "Large Catechism" for pastors.

Luther and those with him pointed out that their faith was the same as historical Christianity. The "Augsburg Confession," an explanation of their teaching prepared for the meeting called by the emperor at Augsburg in 1530, was written by Philip Melancthon, Luther's closest coworker. He also wrote a further defense of these teachings, the "Apology to the Augsburg Confession". Luther himself wrote the "Smalcald Articles" in 1536 as a statement of his teachings. Nevertheless, Luther was expelled from the church and, at the Council of Trent, concluding in 1563, the Roman Church condemned as heresy the teaching of justification through faith alone.

As a result, a separate church body slowly developed, often called the Evangelical Church (The nickname "Lutheran" also stuck, as names often do which are given rather than chosen.) In those times, religion and politics were joined by the expectation that those who lived in each feudal territory would follow the faith of their prince. The terrible warfare accompanying these developments was almost inevitable. As the "Thirty Years War," one of the most destructive wars of history, raged across Europe, it appeared for a time that Lutheranism would be wiped out.

Meanwhile, the teachings of those agreeing with Luther became more specifically defined. In addition to the three Creeds accepted by all of Christianity, the Small and

Large Catechisms, the Augsburg Confession and its Apology, the Smalcald Articles, and Luther's "Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope," the "Formula of Concord" was developed after Luther's death by those seeking common agreement on Lutheran teaching. These confessions of faith, gathered into the Book of Concord in 1580, are the point of unity for all Lutherans.

Lutheranism eventually became the official religion of Germany and Scandinavia and spread to other areas. The early focus on pure teaching was followed by a swing toward "Pietism", an emphasis on right living over right teaching. This allowed the rise of rationalism, which looked to human reason as the ultimate judge of truth. As a reaction, a move back to confessionalism followed.

Lutherans spread around the world with the early explorers and joined in colonizing America as early as 1623. American Lutheran churches united in various groups along local and ethnic lines under such leaders as Rev. Henry Melchior Muhlenberg and others who followed. Lutherans in both America and Europe continue to struggle with issues of faith and practice, such as the tension between loyalty to the Lutheran Confessions vs. assimilation by Protestantism in general, the question of Biblical inspiration and authority, etc..