

Genesis of the LCMS

Week 2: January 31, 2010

(Review Pietism and Rationalism)

The Union Church - The Prussian Union and Germany - Evangelicalism

One year after he ascended to the throne in 1798, Frederick William III, being *summus episcopus* (Supreme Governor of the Protestant Churches), decreed a **new common liturgical agenda (service book)** to be published, for use in **both the Lutheran and Reformed congregations**. To accomplish this, a commission to prepare this common agenda was formed. This liturgical agenda was the culmination of the efforts of his predecessors to unify these two Protestant churches in Prussia and in its predecessor, the Electorate of Brandenburg, becoming later its core province.

The two Protestant churches had existed parallelly after Prince-Elector John Sigismund declared his conversion from Lutheranism to Calvinism in 1617, with most of his subjects remaining Lutheran, but many of the immigrants coming thereafter were Calvinists.

Major reforms to the administration of Prussia were undertaken after the defeat by Napoléon's army at the Battle of Jena-Auerstedt. As a part of these reforms, the leadership structure of both the Lutheran and the Reformed Churches was abolished by the Prussian government. In 1808 the Reformed Friedrich Schleiermacher, pastor of Trinity Church (Berlin-Friedrichstadt), issued his ideas for a constitutional reform of the Protestant Churches, also proposing a union.

In 1815, after the defeat of Napoléon I, **a consistory was reintroduced** for each Prussian province. This differed from the old structure in that the new leadership administered the affairs of all faiths; Catholics, Jews, Lutherans, Mennonites, Moravians, and the Calvinists (Reformed Christians)...

On September 27, 1817, Frederick William announced that on the 300th anniversary of the Reformation Potsdam's Reformed court and garrison congregation, led by Court Preacher Rulemann Friedrich Eylert, and the Lutheran garrison congregation, both using the Calvinist Garrison Church (German: Garnisonskirche (Potsdam)) would unite into one Evangelical Christian congregation on Reformation Day, October 31. Frederick William expressed his desire to see the Protestant congregations around Prussia follow this example, and become Union congregations. Both Calvinist and Lutheran church were subject to state supervision, carried out by the newly created Prussian Ministry of Religious, Educational and Medical Affairs (German: Preußisches Ministerium der geistlichen, Unterrichts- und Medizinalangelegenheiten, est. in 1817). Karl vom Stein zum Altenstein (German) was appointed as minister. In the years that followed, many Lutheran and Reformed congregations did follow the example of Potsdam, and became single merged congregations, while others maintained their former Lutheran or Reformed denomination.

A number of steps were taken to effect the number of pastors that would become Union pastors. Candidates for ministry, from 1820 onwards were required to state whether they would be willing to join the Union. All of the theological faculty at the Rhenish Frederick William's University in Bonn belonged to the Union. Also an ecumenical ordination vow was formulated in which the pastor avowed allegiance to the Evangelical Church.

What is this “Evangelicalism”; Theological “don’t ask, don’t tell”?

[Walther, 1844 on the name “Evangelical”] Two or three hundred years ago, whoever said: I am an Evangelical, was thereby confessing, as all the world knew, that he was a Lutheran. Luther was certainly the one through whom God had again placed his Gospel into everyone’s hands. But the winds of time were blowing, and with them the culture and the name. Whoever now says: ‘I am an Evangelical’ is confessing that he is a Christian of whom it cannot be known what he believes about a number of chief tenets of the Christian faith. So tell me, whoever regards what he preaches as really being true, and who does not want to shackle the truth but wants to confess completely, can that person confess it (what he regards as the truth, whatever it might be) in a church that relies on two confessional writings that cancel each other out, that is, where the one flatly rejects the other? Or to a church that thus publicly has no

confessional writings, yes in which the two sorts of faith are approved, and thus, the truth and the lie? (For two contradicting doctrines still cannot both be true!) Wouldn't you think that it would be impossible for people who regard the whole Bible as true could have come up with the thought that this new so-called 'united' or Evangelical Church, established by a Prussian queen, this church of tyrannized churches, compelled against their will, smuggled in through all sorts of scheming, demanded by the most nationalistic zeal, is the last bloom of the kingdom of God in the world, the vestibule of the glorious temple of a thousand year kingdom of Christ upon earth (expected only by enthusiasts)? Isn't this church much rather the herald of another age of a Babylonian confusion of languages? Is the pinnacle of the true unity of faith and Spirit of the Christian church an externally unifying ceremonial unification of differently faithed believers? **Through this new Evangelical Church will not the confusion over the points of contention between the Lutherans and Reformed be elevated to an article of faith, and the surrender of the truth made into a condition for this new supposed 'orthodoxy'?** Isn't this new Evangelical church through this confession she is putting into practice, that various versions of this or that doctrine will be allowed to be taught, also paving the way so that finally all that is clearly declared in God's Word must be professed to be uncertain and unclear so that the exposition of Scripture must fall prey to the whims of every charismatic and rationalist? Is this not reason to fear that when a congregation is first constituted as evangelical, without the stability of a decisive confession, that quickly a rationalistic preacher will follow that evangelical pastor? Won't that necessarily be the next step? Won't it be considered unjust to deny another person his rights? If the Evangelical is permitted to say: "The explanation of these passages about the sacraments, about election, etc., is left to the conscience of each individual, and no one should call another a heretic in these points over differences." Can't the rationalist then be granted this right of freedom in the explanation on many other points, and must he not be given permission? – In a short time, the present so-called Evangelical Church, lacking a confession of the truth in the most important articles of the Christian doctrine, can declare the same as unimportant, non-essential and apparently indifferent, and Christ's Word uncertain. Therefore she can be seen as nothing other than the fellowship of indifference, which means, of people who evaluate true and false doctrine as the same. That is why we Lutherans cannot possibly call ourselves Evangelical nor do so any longer, in order that we not become changed into the latter and thus to deny our faith. We must much rather cry out to all the Lutherans who have deluded themselves with that beautiful name, 'Evangelical', and have let themselves be drawn into the net of this false union: "How long will you hang between two opinions? If the LORD is your God follow him. But if it is Baal, follow him." (1 Kings 18.)

Claus Harms and the Confessional Revival (1817)

Claus Harms (May 25, 1778 – February 1, 1855) was a German clergyman and theologian.

Harms was born at Fahrstedt in Schleswig-Holstein, and in his youth worked in his father's mill. At the University of Kiel he repudiated the prevailing rationalism and under the influence of Schleiermacher became a fervent Evangelical preacher, first at Lunden (1806), and then at Kiel (1816).

Harms's trenchant style made him very popular, and he did great service for his cause especially in 1817, when, on the 300th anniversary of the Reformation, he published side by side with Luther's theses, ninety-five of his own, attacking reason as "the pope of our time."

In thesis 50 of his own 95 he writes:

The confessions of the Lutheran Church give us a correct interpretation of the Bible, but at the moment, the church is in a sad state ... reason is running wildly through the church, driving Christ away from the altar, throwing God's Word out of the pulpit, mixing slime with holy water in the baptismal font, erasing the superscription over the confessional and driving the priest out of the sanctuary.

And he asks a good question in Thesis 77:

To say that time has removed the wall of separation between Lutherans and Reformed is not to speak directly. The question is: Who has fallen away from the faith of their church, the Lutherans or the Reformed? Or both?

Next Week: Walther leaves the University to begin his career and he meets the Rev. Martin Stephan.