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## Lutherans in the United States, 1930-1960: Searching for the "Center"

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## CHAPTER 12

# *Lutherans in the United States, 1930-1960: Searching for the "Center"*

MARK GRANQUIST

Lutherans have long been underrepresented in American religious history. Much of this is due to the fact that Lutherans have been somewhat outside of or separate from the mainstream of American Protestantism. In part this is because Lutherans have distrusted the predominance of Reformed theology in American Protestantism, and thus have intentionally maintained a cautious distance. But there is also the matter of language: well into the twentieth century much of Lutheran religious and theological life in the United States was expressed in continental European languages. Finally, many regions of the country have been relatively unfamiliar with Lutheranism, as Lutherans have been strongly concentrated in the "Lutheran Bible Belt," a geographical area stretching from Pennsylvania through the Great Lakes states to the upper Midwest.<sup>1</sup>

To say that Lutherans have been somewhat outside the mainstream of American Protestantism is not to say that they have been completely isolated. In fact, they have been quite attentive to many of the larger issues facing Protestantism in the United States. But when Lutherans have become involved in such issues, it has been primarily from the standpoint of how such issues affected the internal affairs of their own denomination(s).

This essay is an examination of how one such issue in American Protestantism, namely, the fundamentalist/modernist controversy of the

1. The question of "Americanization" has long engaged and puzzled American Lutheran historians, especially the degree to which Lutherans in America adopted and adapted the essentially Reformed nature of American voluntary Protestantism.

first part of the twentieth century, influenced and affected American Lutheranism. The main question is: to what extent did this controversy determine the battles and mergers within American Lutheranism in these years? In addition, are the "two-party" models (fundamentalist/modernist or evangelical/mainline) adequate for understanding the history of American Lutheranism? The thesis of this paper is that the various versions of the "two-party" models do not fully explain the rather tortuous history of American Lutheranism in this century. American Lutherans are interested in, and in some ways are affected by, the fundamentalist/modernist controversies (and subsequent developments). But at their core, Lutheran battles and mergers were fought on the basis of confessional theology and polity, and the various parties to these Lutheran struggles cannot be divided along the "two-party" lines.

## **Lutheran Denomination Building, 1900-1960**

Between 1900 and 1960, Lutherans in the United States experienced two major developments which affected them significantly: a process of mergers and affiliations which brought about an important consolidation of denominations, and the completion of a process of Americanization which brought them into the mainstream of American religious life. Many American Lutherans sought the union of all Lutheran groups, but this goal proved unattainable, and by 1962 Lutherans were consolidated into three major denominations.<sup>2</sup>

The first round of mergers within American Lutheranism (1917-30) brought many scattered Lutheran denominations together, so that by 1930 there were five major Lutheran groups, with six or seven additional smaller groups. Also during this period, inter-Lutheran cooperative groups developed, the most notable being the National Lutheran Council (1918-66) and the American Lutheran Conference (1930-54), which brought more unity and focus to American Lutheranism.<sup>3</sup> Both became

2. The most complete history of Lutheranism in America during this period is E. Clifford Nelson, *Lutheranism in North America 1914-1970* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1972). See also E. Clifford Nelson, ed., *The Lutherans in North America* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975); and Abdel Ross Wentz, *A Basic History of Lutheranism in America*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964).

3. For the National Lutheran Council, see Frederick K. Wentz, *Lutherans in Conference: The Story of the National Lutheran Council, 1918-1966* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1968); and Osborne Hauge, *Lutherans Working Together: A History of*

loci for discussions on greater unity, and perhaps organic unity, among Lutherans.

The American Lutheran Conference in particular represented the "center" group of Lutheran denominations, which consisted mainly of Scandinavians and some Germans who emigrated to the United States in the nineteenth century. Beyond the American Lutheran Conference were two other major groups, or wings: first, the United Lutheran Church in America (ULCA), which was the most Americanized group and represented the heritage of eastern seaboard Lutheranism;<sup>4</sup> and second, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, which was the most conservative and exclusively confessional portion of American Lutheranism.<sup>5</sup> Merger discussions within the centrist American Lutheran Conference often divided over the issue of including one or the other of these two wings in the discussions, and the shift in direction that this would entail. Missouri balked at any discussions which would include the ULCA, while others in the American Lutheran Conference objected to the possible exclusion of the ULCA merely to placate Missouri.<sup>6</sup> Eventually, by 1962 a second round of mergers resulted in three major American Lutheran denominations of roughly the same size, together representing 95 percent of American Lutherans.<sup>7</sup>

Of course this story, in all its detail, has been told well by denominational historians of American Lutheranism. What is less well studied, and of more general interest, is the relation of this process of Lutheran

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*the National Lutheran Council, 1918-1943* (New York: National Lutheran Council, 1943). For the American Lutheran Conference, see Fred W. Meuser, *The Formation of the American Lutheran Church* (Columbus, OH: Wartburg Press, 1958); and E. Clifford Nelson and Eugene Fevold, *The Lutheran Church Among the Norwegian-Americans*, 2 vols. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1960), especially 2:287-308.

4. There is no contemporary history of the ULCA; see relevant sections in Nelson, *Lutherans in North America*, 373-77; and Wentz, *A Basic History*, 269-86.

5. On the Missouri Synod see Walter Baepler, *A Century of Grace: A History of the Missouri Synod, 1847-1947* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1947); and Carl S. Meyer, ed., *Moving Frontiers: Readings in the History of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964).

6. So while the leaders of the American Lutheran Church (1930-60) and the Norwegians made overtures to Missouri, and snubbed ULCA, Augustana kept forcing the issue of ULCA back onto the American Lutheran Conference agenda.

7. The three denominations were the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, the Lutheran Church in America (LCA), and the American Lutheran Church (ALC, 1960-88). On the LCA see Johannes Knudsen, *The Formation of the Lutheran Church in America* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978); on the ALC see Charles P. Lutz, ed., *Church Roots* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985).

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mergers to events occurring within the larger realm of American Protestantism, and the impact of the fundamentalist/modernist controversies on American Lutheranism. As Lutherans were seeking unity, and a truly "American" Lutheran voice, how were they using, and making sense of, arguments and events from the larger American Protestant scene?

### **The American Lutheran Conference**

This essay will concentrate, then, on merger discussions within the American Lutheran Conference, the umbrella group representing the "center" of American Lutheran denominations, and how models and terminology from the fundamentalist/modernist controversy invaded and influenced the negotiations among American Lutherans over further steps toward Lutheran unity and union. The most important issues that divided Lutherans concerned the nature of confessional agreement necessary to fellowship, cooperation, and merger, and the nature of authority of Scripture. As American Lutheran theologians and church leaders began to discuss these issues in English, they were looking for formulations that would not only reflect their Lutheran heritage, but would also work given their American context.

To understand the dynamics of the Lutheran situation during this period, it is important to understand the groups involved (see Table 1). There were five "big players" in this situation: the United Lutheran Church in America (ULCA) on one end, and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod on the other; within the center three groups dominated: the Augustana Evangelical Lutheran Church (the Swedes),<sup>8</sup> the Evangelical Lutheran Church (the Norwegians),<sup>9</sup> and the American Lutheran Church (ALC, 1930-60).<sup>10</sup> The center groups were held together in a larger grouping called the American Lutheran Conference (ALConf), but it would be wrong to think that all the groups within the Conference were of one mind. Augustana, the Swedish Lutheran body, had strong historical ties to Eastern Lutheranism and the ULCA. The ALC, an English/German group, had equally strong ties to the Missouri Synod. The Evangelical Lutheran

8. On the Augustana Synod, see G. Everett Arden, *Augustana Heritage: The Story of the Augustana Lutheran Church* (Rock Island, IL: Augustana Press, 1963).

9. On the ELC see Nelson and Fevold, *Lutheranism among the Norwegian-Americans*.

10. On the "old" ALC (1930-60) see Fred W. Meuser, *The Formation of the American Lutheran Church* (Columbus, OH: Wartburg Press, 1958).

**TABLE 1**  
**Institutional Structures of American Lutherans, 1900-1960**

\**United Lutheran Church in America* (1918-62) — Eastern German Lutherans from colonial times; merged in 1918

American Lutheran Conference (cooperative body, 1930-54)	* <i>Augustana Evangelical Lutheran Church</i> (1860-1962) — Swedish * <i>Evangelical Lutheran Church</i> (1917-60) — Norwegian; merger of various Norwegian groups * <i>United Evangelical Lutheran Church</i> (1896-1960) — Danish * <i>Lutheran Free Church</i> (1897-1963) — Norwegian * <i>American Lutheran Church</i> (1930-60) — German; merger of some midwestern German Lutheran groups
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*Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod* (1847- ) — German; conservative confessional midwestern Lutheran group

\*Members of the National Lutheran Council (1918-66) — a cooperative body that included ULCA and churches of the American Lutheran Conference, but not Missouri.

Note: Denominational names change over time; each name given is the *last* given name of that particular group.

Church, a Norwegian Lutheran group, was formed in 1917 by the merger of three smaller groups. The Norwegians were often divided over their outside loyalties: some Norwegian groups looked strongly in the direction of the ALC and Missouri, while others were equally suspicious of such ties with Missouri. Thus, while the American Lutheran Conference was formed in 1930 as a vehicle for further cooperation and possible Lutheran union, the denominations that constituted the Conference were not united on the direction in which to proceed.<sup>11</sup>

The main question that convulsed the Conference was that of the direction and theological basis for the union of Lutheran denominations.<sup>12</sup> The Conference was determined not just to attempt to draw together its own members, but to serve as a vehicle for wider Lutheran union. The trouble was over the inclusion of Missouri and the ULCA in these wider

11. When addressing the 1940 convention of the American Lutheran Conference, the President of the Augustana Synod, P. O. Bersell, stated that the Conference suffered from the weakness "that our fellowship has been more exclusive than inclusive." Quoted in Nelson, *Lutheranism in North America*, 83.

12. These questions regarding the bases of unity and union have been some of the most important and influential questions in the history of Lutherans in America. For the various approaches to Lutheran unity, see John H. Tietjen, *Which Way to Lutheran Unity? A History of the Efforts to Unite the Lutherans of America* (St. Louis: Clayton Publishing House, 1975).

negotiations; while the ULCA was generally open to including Missouri in these talks, Missouri was not convinced of ULCA's "orthodoxy," and this made the inclusion of both ULCA and Missouri very difficult. The members of the Conference recognized this problem, but were divided over what to do about it. The ALC and the Norwegians sought to include Missouri by excluding the ULCA; Augustana held out for an inclusive framework that would encompass all groups (including ULCA), but the practical result of such a move would have been the self-exclusion of Missouri from such proceedings.

Discussions of closer affiliation and possible union began in a preliminary way in the 1920s and '30s, with the attempt to find a common theological ground between the groups. This resulted in the issuing of "theses" or "declarations" by various Lutheran groups attempting to spell out their understanding of the theological basis for such cooperation or union (see Table 2, p. 242). Negotiations led in 1940 to the formation of a common proposal called the Pittsburgh Declaration, which negotiators hoped would serve as the basis of union. The drafters of the declaration, however, made compromises that the denominations were not willing to accept, and the plan failed. During the 1940s a group of negotiators from the Conference and the ULCA, the so-called "Committee of 34," formulated a similar plan of union, but it too was defeated. Negotiations began to unite the five members of the Conference, but Augustana wanted to hold out for a wider union, and dropped out of the proceedings. The remaining Conference denominations set forth toward merger, and formed a new denomination called the American Lutheran Church (ALC, 1960-88) in 1960. Augustana and the ULCA, along with two other smaller groups not included in the Conference negotiations, held their own talks, which resulted in the formation of the Lutheran Church in America (LCA) in 1962. This meant that by 1962 there were three major Lutheran denominations in the United States (LCA, ALC, and Missouri).

## **Lutheran Confessionalism and the Two-Party Paradigm**

Some have tried to force these Lutheran divisions into a modernist/fundamentalist or liberal/conservative scale, but such an attempt does not do justice to the situation.<sup>13</sup> The ULCA was not really modernist or liberal

13. For this conclusion, and the analysis of Lutheran divisions, see Nelson, *Lutheranism in North America*, 68-115.

as the terms are generally used,<sup>14</sup> and neither was the Missouri Synod fundamentalistic, at its core.<sup>15</sup> There were tendencies and sympathies in these directions by some within the respective church bodies, but such labels do not adequately define these groups. Rather, the scale of divisions between these various denominations involved the question of relations to, and understandings of, the Lutheran confessional documents of the sixteenth century (the Augsburg Confession of 1530 and the Book of Concord of 1580), and subsequent theological traditions of Lutheranism, especially the Lutheran Orthodox theologians of the seventeenth century. The debates focused on what it means to be a confessional Lutheran, and how this identity was to be formulated in the twentieth century. Concludes one scholar:

Confessional Lutherans often did not agree with each other. . . . In America they continued the battle among themselves. There were numerous doctrinal disagreements and divergent ways of applying doctrine to practical situations.<sup>16</sup>

All of these American Lutheran groups officially held that, along with the Scriptures and the historic Creeds, the Lutheran Confessions were normative in the denominations and in any discussions of closer cooperation and merger. The question was how such documents were to be interpreted, and what degree of unanimity was to be required. There were really two types of Lutheran confessionalism at work in this situation and among these denominations.<sup>17</sup> The first was an exclusivistic Confession-

14. In his history of American modernism, William R. Hutchison concludes that "no branch of Lutheranism, eastern or midwestern produced any notable advocate of . . . theological liberalism" (115). Hutchison attributes this in part to "powerful confessional traditions. . . ." *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976).

15. George Marsden suggests that the Missouri Synod, among other groups, adopted "some fundamentalist ideals while retaining other distinctive features of their European traditions." *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 195. A Missouri Synod author has suggested that "Fundamentalism and the Missouri Synod were not related closely enough for either one to exert major and lasting influence on the other." Milton L. Rudnick, *Fundamentalism and the Missouri Synod: A Historical Study of Their Interaction and Mutual Influence* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966), 115.

16. Tietjen, *Which Way to Lutheran Unity?*, 8.

17. For a detailed study of these two confessional traditions, sometimes labeled "Neo-Lutheranism" and "Old-Lutheranism," see Nelson, *Lutheranism in North America*, especially 70-87.



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alism which predicated cooperation and union on absolute agreement on all theological issues; this approach, drawing from seventeenth-century Lutheran orthodoxy, characterized the Missouri Synod and the ALC (1930-60), along with sections of the Norwegians. The second was an ecumenical confessionalism which based cooperation and union on agreement in confessional basics, without further tests or negotiations; this approach drew heavily from certain irenic statements in the Augsburg Confession, as well as newer understandings of confessional authority (the "Erlangen School") within nineteenth-century German Lutheranism. This second approach exemplified the position of the ULCA, of the new leaders of the Augustana Synod, and of a minority among the Norwegians. The irony is that while all of these groups professed to be confessional Lutherans, they did not always trust the sincerity of each others' professions.

These confessional divisions stood behind the complicated negotiations over cooperation and union among American Lutherans in the twentieth century, with the central question being: What does it mean to be a Lutheran? Various groups at various times would issue "position papers." These declarations, theses, and statements would then themselves become the focus of further debate and negotiations (see Table 2, p. 242). The ecumenical approach characterized the ULCA's Washington Declaration of 1920 (and further documents), while the exclusivist position was embodied in the Chicago Theses of 1919, the Minneapolis Theses of 1925 (the basis of the American Lutheran Conference), and Missouri's "Brief Statement" of 1932. These documents represented long-standing theological debates within Lutheranism, and had roots in previous centuries.

## The Doctrine of Scripture

But there were new features in this debate among American Lutherans in the twentieth century, and it is at this point that we see the contact with and influence from the wider sphere of American Protestantism. For suddenly, and without much warning, the question of the nature and authority of the Scriptures erupted within American Lutheranism.<sup>18</sup> Like many American Protestants, Lutherans tried to define and refine their notions of the author-

18. The question of biblical authority and inspiration were not really Lutheran questions in the nineteenth century. Nelson concludes: "In 1900 most Lutherans were proud of their church's solid front against the claims of critical study of the Bible." *Lutherans in North America*, 384.

**TABLE 2**  
**Inter-Lutheran Merger Documents (1900-1960)**

*Chicago Theses* (1919)

To provide an "orthodox" basis for Lutheran union; represents the "center" of Lutheran confessionalism

*Washington Declaration* (1920)

ULCA counterproposal to Chicago Theses; stressed ecumenical character of confessional Lutheranism

*Minneapolis Theses* (1925)

Intended as middle way between ULCA and Missouri; basis for the formation of the American Lutheran Conference (1930-54)

*Brief Statement* (1932)

Missouri Synod statement on basis for unity

*Savannah Declaration* (1934)

*Baltimore Declaration* (1938)

ULCA statements on confessionalism and the question of Scripture

*Sandusky Declaration* (1938)

ALC statement directed to Missouri; restates "Chicago" and "Minneapolis"

*Pittsburgh Agreement* (1940)

Product of ALC/ULCA negotiations, but failed as means to unite these two groups

*Plan(s) of the "Committee of 34"* (1950)

Proposals to unite all eight members of the National Lutheran Council; defeated by member denominations

*United Testimony* (1952)

Statement of belief of four American Lutheran Conference bodies (Augustana having withdrawn); led to organic merger of these groups into the "new" American Lutheran Church (1960-88)

**Note:** Adapted from table "Documents of Lutheran Unity — 1919-1940," E. Clifford Nelson, *Lutheranism in North America, 1914-1970*, p. 71. Most of these documents can be found in a collection of Lutheran sources: Richard C. Wolf, *Documents of Lutheran Unity in America* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966)

ity of the Bible, and to state more carefully the ways in which the Bible was the inspired Word of God. Many American Lutherans, in their attempt to construct such a definition in English (rather than in the immigrant languages), used the terminology, derived from fundamentalism, of "verbal inspiration" and "inerrancy." For example, the Minneapolis Theses of 1925

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stated that the Scriptures are "the divinely inspired, revealed, and inerrant Word of God . . . the only infallible authority in all matters of faith and life."<sup>19</sup> Other Lutherans thought this attempt was misguided and mistaken, in that it was attributing a type of authority to the Bible that Lutherans had never traditionally held. In 1930 one Lutheran theologian wrote:

Lutheranism takes its own position. . . . it cannot follow fundamentalism in many of its contentions. The general attitude of fundamentalists is to exalt the Bible in a legal way. . . . There is a lack of the appreciation of the living Word of God within the Bible.<sup>20</sup>

It is in this point of disagreement that the history of American Lutheranism seems most closely to parallel the larger divisions within American Protestantism,<sup>21</sup> but there are certain uniquely Lutheran aspects to the American Lutheran debates.

Lutheran ideas about Scripture and the inspiration of the Bible are a particular tradition within Protestantism, distinctive and separate from the Reformed tradition which produced the fundamentalist/modernist debates over the question of scriptural authority. Lutheran theology, going back to Martin Luther himself, has traditionally held that the authority of the Scriptures rests in their identity as the Word of God, but that the Word of God is not limited to the Scriptures.<sup>22</sup> The Word of God is most properly Jesus Christ himself, and then secondarily the means by which the reality of Christ is presented to humanity. Thus the Bible is the Word of God in a christological sense, in that it witnesses to the Word, namely, Jesus Christ. But preaching, too, and other means of spreading the gospel can be con-

19. "Minneapolis Theses," in Wolf, *Documents of Lutheran Unity*, 340.

20. John A. W. Haas, "What Is Lutheranism?" in Vergilius Ferm, ed., *What Is Lutheranism? A Symposium in Interpretation* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1930), 192.

21. Nelson states the issue this way: "The Modernist-Fundamentalist controversy of the mid-twenties forced the issue of biblical criticism. Was the choice that lay before Lutherans . . . limited to two alternatives, either to reprecipitate an orthodox view of Scripture . . . or to abandon the Lutheran confessions? Some concluded these were the only options, and as far as Scripture was concerned, they found it impossible to disassociate themselves from a fundamentalist viewpoint: the verbally-inspired inerrancy of the Bible." *Lutheranism in North America*, 83.

22. On Luther's understanding of Scripture, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *Luther the Expositor: Introduction to the Reformers' Exegetical Writings* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959); and Willem Kooiman, *Luther and the Bible* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959).

sidered the Word of God, insofar as they "push" or communicate the reality of Jesus Christ.

Luther, being less systematic than Calvin or other reformers, created some ambiguity for Lutherans with his various ideas of the Word of God, and the authority of Scripture. He was strongly insistent that, taken as a whole, the Bible is the true and authoritative Word of God, yet he could be very critical of parts of the Bible. Luther doubted the canonicity of the Epistles of James and Jude,<sup>23</sup> and wished in print that the book of Esther had never been included in the Bible.<sup>24</sup> At times Luther even suggested that the gospel writers had at times made mistakes in their facts. The Lutheran Orthodox theologians who followed Luther in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries went a great distance in "systematizing" the Lutheran doctrine of Scripture, but they did not remove all the inconsistencies.<sup>25</sup>

Thus it was that, when the question of the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures erupted within American Lutheranism in the twentieth century, there was more than one "Lutheran" position on the question. The main point of contention, as Lutherans moved into using English in their theology, was whether or not terms like "inerrancy" or "verbal inspiration" were the correct English equivalents of Lutheran positions on the question. Did Luther and the later Lutheran theologians teach, in emphasis or in fact, that the Bible is the "inerrant" or "verbally inspired" Word of God? Some Lutherans, most notably in the Missouri Synod and the ALC, suggested that such was the case.<sup>26</sup> Other Lutherans, mainly in the ULCA and some in Augustana, sought to concentrate on Luther's idea of the christological authority of the Scriptures, and saw that such an idea was not incompatible with the higher criticism of the biblical text.<sup>27</sup>

23. Martin Luther, "Preface to the Epistles of St. James and St. Jude" (1545).

24. Martin Luther, "Tabletalk" (1534) #3391a. See also "Bondage of the Will" (1525), *Luther's Works*, American edition, 33:110.

25. For the developments in Lutheran Orthodoxy, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *From Luther to Kierkegaard: A Study in the History of Theology* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950); and Robert D. Preus, "The Word of God in the Theology of Orthodoxy," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 33 (1962): 469-83.

26. For a detailed account of the discussions between the ALC and Missouri Synod on the one hand, and the ULCA on the other, over the question of the authority of Scripture, see E. Clifford Nelson, "A Case Study in Lutheran Unity Efforts: ULCA Conversations with Missouri and the ALC, 1936-40," in Herbert T. Neve and Benjamin Johnson, eds., *The Maturing of American Lutheranism* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1968), 201-23.

27. On the new openness in Augustana toward criticism, and the repudiation of fundamentalist Biblicism, see Arden, *Augustana Heritage*, 284-97.

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An additional reason for some Lutherans to adopt the language of biblical inerrancy or verbal inspiration came from their fear of higher biblical criticism, which had been moving into some American denominations and Divinity Schools. Many American Lutherans, especially in the American Lutheran Conference and the Missouri Synod, saw higher criticism as a direct threat to their traditional understanding of scriptural authority.<sup>28</sup> They also saw the initial tentative openings to higher criticism in the ULCA as a rejection of the Lutheran theological and confessional traditions. So in their writings and their official doctrinal statements some American Lutherans included phrases describing the Scriptures as "inerrant," "infallible," and "verbally inspired." But they insisted very strongly that such words were *not* a new import to Lutheranism from fundamentalism, but, instead, were the very doctrines taught by the Lutheran orthodox theologians, the Lutheran confessions, and by Luther himself. One of the leading theologians of the ALC, Johan Michael Reu, came to maintain:

In this country the slogan has been proclaimed, "Lutheran theology in its classical period knew nothing of a verbal inspiration." If [this slogan] . . . include[s] the rejection of the inerrancy of the original documents, it cannot be supported by Luther's views. . . .<sup>29</sup>

Other Lutherans, especially in the ULCA and some in Augustana, were cautiously open to higher criticism, as long as the *christological* authority of Scripture was maintained. Taking their inspiration from Luther's example, they insisted that, used properly, higher criticism could clarify the biblical record and strengthen the Christian faith. Augustana pastor C. A. Wendell wrote in 1930 that for Luther:

The Bible may be externally rough and rude, but . . . "precious is the treasure, Christ, which lies therein." That is the secret of Luther's love for the Bible . . . not its literary beauty, not its philosophical insight, not

28. In this battle, Missouri Synod Lutherans felt a common purpose with the Fundamentalists, while not in agreement with them on other issues. See Rudnick, *Fundamentalism and the Missouri Synod*, especially 67-79.

29. Johan Michael Reu, *Luther and the Scriptures* (Columbus, OH: Wartburg Press, 1944). This work represents Reu's complete conversion to inerrancy; earlier he had held that the Bible is inerrant only in regard to salvation. This earlier "liberal" view had almost scuttled the formation of the ALC in 1930. See Nelson, *Lutheranism in North America*, 86.

its historical or scientific value, not its alleged “inerrancy from cover to cover,” but Christ who dwells within.<sup>30</sup>

These Lutherans rejected inerrancy as an unnecessary and un-Lutheran addition of modern origin.

The Lutherans who were open to higher criticism were, however, very cautious in making their pronouncements, for fear of sending the wrong signals. In the late 1930s the ULCA held up publication of a New Testament commentary by one of its teachers because of its mildly positive stance toward higher criticism; it was feared that publication of this work would upset merger negotiations, as well as a number of pastors and members within the ULCA itself.<sup>31</sup>

The dispute among twentieth-century American Lutherans over the formulation and wording of a doctrine of the authority of Scripture raises the question of whether it is helpful to view these disputes in light of the fundamentalist/modernist controversy. There is no doubt that American Lutherans were interested in and influenced by this growing rift within American Protestantism; there is no question that the use of inerrantist language derived in part from such interest and influence. But it is quite another story to explain Lutheran divisions on the basis of such a two-party schema; for a further examination of this question we must return to a larger-scale view of the relationship of American Lutherans to the fundamentalist/modernist controversy.

## Lutherans and Fundamentalists

As a general rule, American Lutherans in the first half of the twentieth century were a conservative and cautious group, and they were wary of new movements within American Christianity. There were no groups of

30. C. A. Wendell, “What is Lutheranism?” in Ferm, ed., *What is Lutheranism?* 238.

31. The books in question were commentaries on the Old and New Testament written by ULCA Professor H. C. Alleman, originally published in 1936. Nelson suggests that Alleman was “one of the first American Lutheran Biblical scholars to employ the historical critical method” and that “the ULCA found it expedient to withhold temporarily [the Old Testament volume for fear] . . . that the offending book might upset inter-Lutheran relations.” The books by Alleman became an issue in the 1936-40 discussions between ALC and ULCA. Nelson, “A Case Study . . .,” 211-12 and 265-66, n. 32.

individuals which could be defined as "liberals" or "modernists" in the larger sense of the term. Even the ULCA, which Missouri and others branded as liberal, came nowhere close to endorsing the liberal theology of American Protestantism. For example, ULCA leader John A. W. Haas followed up his criticism of fundamentalism (note 21) with a critique of modernism:

Lutheranism is far more adverse, however, to modernism. It is willing to use modern forms of thought and established modern results, but it considers the fundamental error of modernism to be the constant correction of the body of evangelical truth, by the changing conceptions of science and the varying contentions of philosophy.<sup>32</sup>

There were some cautious attempts to employ higher criticism of the Scriptures, but none of the other theological aspects of modernism.

On the other hand, although Lutherans of all stripes expressed varying degrees of sympathy with specific fundamentalist positions, not even the most conservative Lutheran groups (Missouri and ALC, especially) can be considered simply fundamentalists.<sup>33</sup> In fact, there were leaders within the Missouri Synod who attacked parts of the fundamentalist program quite severely, and sought to stem these influences (particularly "unionism," premillennialism, and social activism) within the Synod. Milton Rudnick observes:

Among doctrines which Fundamentalism had allegedly distorted as a result of its Reformed orientation were those of the means of grace, especially Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. Again and again it is stated that liberalism originated in the Reformed hermeneutical principle, and that since most Fundamentalists operated with this principle the Missouri Synod could not enter into fellowship with them.<sup>34</sup>

While they appreciated the fundamentalist stance on the question of scriptural authority, they were profoundly opposed to other parts of the fundamentalist platform. Missouri strongly resisted fundamentalism's social activism, that is, the attempt to impose (Reformed) Christian morality

32. "What Is Lutheranism?" in Ferm, *What is Lutheranism?* 193. Nelson gives other examples of ULCA's attitude toward Liberalism and Modernism. *Lutheranism in North America*, 87-88.

33. This is the conclusion of Rudnick, *Fundamentalism and the Missouri Synod*, 103-16; other historians generally agree with him. See also n. 16.

34. Rudnick, *Fundamentalism and the Missouri Synod*, 87.

on the American nation.<sup>35</sup> To give but one example, the Missouri Synod adamantly opposed Prohibition. And the fundamentalist approach to unity also seemed wrongheaded. Missouri called the attempt to forge unity on the basis of a few common beliefs "Unionism," and insisted that unity could only be achieved by means of total doctrinal agreement. Missouri leaders saw the creeping influence of fundamentalism as a dangerous encroachment of Reformed Christianity into their Lutheran Synod.

Of course, there were some individual Lutherans, including pastors and professors, who did become active in the fundamentalist movement, but these personal decisions did not necessarily reflect synodical or church decisions. For example, one eastern Lutheran teacher and pastor, Joseph Seiss, was an active leader in the millennialism movement of the late nineteenth century.<sup>36</sup> ALC professor Leander S. Keyser was "closely affiliated" with fundamentalism, and in the 1920s he was an "active participant" in the World's Christian Fundamentals Association.<sup>37</sup> Then there was Missouri Synod professor and popular national radio speaker Walter Maier, who was sympathetic to the fundamentalists, and who attracted many of them as listeners because of his scathing denunciations of liberalism. Still, while Maier was sympathetic to the fundamentalist movement, he was not a fundamentalist in the classic sense of the term.<sup>38</sup> In keeping with other Lutheran confessionalists, Maier insisted that *all* Christian doctrines were fundamental, not just the five that the fundamentalists selected. He was happy to make common cause with them to defend biblical authority, but this was a strategic move to counter liberalism, and not a meeting of the minds.

Some have argued, however, that although conservative groups like the ALC and Missouri had their theological differences with fundamentalism, they did share with fundamentalism the same modes of

35. On Lutheran attitudes toward social legislation, especially prohibition, see Nelson, *Lutherans in North America*, 417-18. Only Augustana and the Norwegians supported Prohibition as a means of moral reform.

36. On Seiss, see Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800-1930* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), 95-96. Sandeen suggests that later Lutheran disinterest in millennialism came about because of "the surge of Scandinavian and German immigrants whose confessional and liturgical orientation and lack of English language swamped the syncretistic tendencies of the more Americanized part of the denomination" (p. 163).

37. Donald Huber, *Educating Lutheran Pastors in Ohio, 1830-1980* (Lewiston, NY: Edward Mellen Press, 1989), 172.

38. Rudnick, *Fundamentalism and the Missouri Synod*, 90-102.



thought.<sup>39</sup> The point of contact between these conservative Lutherans and fundamentalism was an opposition to modernity and liberal Christianity and a desire to combat these groups by returning to certain traditional theological "nonnegotiables." In other words, while they had their differences with fundamentalists, these Lutherans employed a similar strategic response to the "acids of modernity."

But this argument misses a key difference between conservative Lutherans and fundamentalists. The theory behind the publication of *The Fundamentals* (beginning in 1909) was to define certain theological essentials to which all Christians must assent. However, for the fundamentalists, agreement on these essentials was enough: different Christians could maintain their own views on such other doctrines as Baptism, the Church and the Sacraments, and the work of the Holy Spirit. This sort of approach was totally antithetical to exclusivist confessionalists such as members of the ALC and the Missouri Synod, who insisted on absolute agreement on *all* theological points before cooperation and union could even be considered. It is telling that, despite their close relations and sympathies, the ALC and the Missouri Synod were never able to achieve such unanimity. It is hard to see any American Lutherans as being more than mildly sympathetic to some of the stated aims of fundamentalism; it is impossible to call these exclusivistic confessionalists "fundamentalists" either in doctrine or approach.

This is not to say that those American Lutherans who adopted inerrantist language to define the authority of the Bible used the term "inerrancy" differently than their fundamentalist counterparts; on this one point the two groups did agree. But agreement on this one point does not mean that these confessional Lutherans had substantially adopted the agenda of fundamentalism, that they were deeply influenced by fundamentalism, or that they substantially agreed with the fundamentalists. The exclusive confessionalists, in Missouri and the other groups, had little use for either the content of fundamentalism or its approach to Christian unity. These confessionalists did share the language of inerrancy with other American Protestant groups, but solely for their own purposes, and because they believed the term captured the meaning of the older Lutheran traditions.

39. For such an argument, see Leigh D. Jordahl, "The Theology of Franz Pieper: a resource for fundamentalistic thought modes among American Lutherans," *Lutheran Quarterly* 23 (May 1971): 118-37.

## Conclusion

It seems clear from our examination of American Lutheranism that the "two-party" system (fundamentalist/modernist) is not adequate to explain or define the growth and divisions within this ecclesial family. Although some American Lutherans expressed some sympathy with either fundamentalist or modernist goals, no group within American Lutheranism can be seen as being either truly modernist or truly fundamentalist. Lutherans found, at times, that their own choices and allegiances brought them into contact with the wider world of American Protestantism, but these contacts did not, in form or content, fundamentally shape any Lutheran denomination.

The main question that divided American Lutherans was the nature and degree of confessional loyalty, and how Lutheran confessional documents could or could not be understood as defining and creating a larger Lutheran union. Disputes centered on the degree to which Lutheran groups needed to agree theologically before cooperation or union was possible. The exclusivistic confessionalists (such as ALC and Missouri) sought further definitions beyond the Confessions, and absolute agreement on all theological issues. Ecumenical confessionalists, such as those in ULCA and Augustana, understood agreement on the confessional documents to be sufficient, and that no additional documents or subscriptions were necessary for unity. The divisions were essentially over the *degree* of confessional agreement necessary for cooperation and unity.

In their search for further clarification and elucidation of the Lutheran Confessions, especially in English, the exclusivist confessionalists did engage in one important and significant borrowing from American fundamentalism, namely, the adoption of the language of "inerrancy" and "infallibility" to express their ideas of scriptural authority. Yet such borrowing did not mean that these Lutherans had become fundamentalists; the terms "inerrancy" and "infallibility" (whether wisely chosen or not) were used by Lutherans to express their understanding of the older traditions of Lutheranism, going back to the Lutheran Orthodox theologians, and perhaps even to Martin Luther himself. Their use of these terms did not signal a Lutheran acceptance of the Reformed, Princetonian view of Scripture which was the norm in most fundamentalist circles. But it is significant to note that even the adoption of common inerrantist statements by the ALC and the Missouri Synod was not enough to ensure or engender a closer cooperation or union between these groups. The fact that they agreed on a common wording to express their understanding of

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the authority of Scripture was not enough to overcome the rest of their differences. It is significant that when the "merger dust" settled in the early 1960s, there were three rather than two Lutheran denominations, and the divisions did not run along a clear liberal/conservative line.

Modernism has had a very limited appeal to American Lutherans, and it would be hard to suggest that any one of these denominations was liberal in any sense of the word. They were conservatives of various types and understandings; at times they borrowed some of the language of fundamentalism for their own purposes. Yet the model of fundamentalism held no promise for them; they did not see the particular doctrines that were so important to fundamentalism as crucial to their own program, nor did they agree that cooperation or union was possible on the basis of these doctrines. A confessional understanding of Lutheran history with multiple disputes and tensions goes much further in explaining the course of American Lutheranism in the twentieth century than any forced application of the two-party model.