

(Very) Brief Highlights of Church History

Early Church Times 1-590 AD

Apostolic Age/Time of the Martyrs about 30 AD-312

- The death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ completes His ministry on earth of the redemption of humankind around the year 30 AD (approximate due to us not knowing for sure the exact year of Jesus' birth)
- After His resurrection, Jesus visits the 10 Disciples and ordains them and they become Apostles meaning "sent ones" (St. John 20:19-31). Jesus commands them to spread the Gospel around the world (St. Matthew 28:19-20), then ascends to the Father in Heaven (St. Luke 24:50-53, Acts 1:6-11).
- 50 Days after the resurrection of Jesus and 10 days after the Ascension, the Holy Spirit descends on the *Day of Pentecost* (Acts 2). This can be viewed as the "birthday of the Church" and 3,000 were converted to Christ on that day.
- The Apostles and early converts to Christianity spread the Gospel rapidly around the world (as we learned how many conditions were ideal for this). St. Paul is the key Apostle (missionary) bringing the Gospel to Gentile (non-Jewish lands). The "Apostolic Age" continues to around 100 AD when the last people who actually knew Jesus on earth had died (all of the 12 Apostles and St. Paul die a martyr's death except St. John).
- The early church experienced controversy with some claiming that Gentile converts should observe many of the Jewish laws. The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) helped resolve this. Gentile converts were just as valid as Jewish ones and were not bound by Jewish Old Testament Law.
- As Christianity spread and grew, *followers of Jesus were often persecuted*-especially by the pagan Roman Empire up until the early 300s. The level of persecution varied from place to place and time to time, but to be a Christian in this time very often meant that you would be ridiculed, persecuted by exclusion from much of society, and even face torture and death (martyrdom). Many times, the Church had to go "underground" to protect itself. Despite the persecution, the Church continues to grow.

The Church Ascends to Prominence-Christian Rulers (Byzantine Period) 313 AD-590

- Constantine won a battle after seeing Christian symbolism in a dream and becomes the Roman Emperor. *In 313 the Edict of Milan was issued and religious tolerance was extended to Christians*, ending the Roman persecutions. By 380 Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, an amazing turn of events.
- The Council of Nicaea was called in 325, mainly to refute the Arian heresy, which denied the divinity of Jesus. From this Council and the Council of Constantinople in 381, the Nicene Creed emerged as the confession of faith for Christian orthodoxy.
- Christianity continued to spread by missionaries (often clergy) to many areas such as Britain, Ireland, and Germany.
- As time went on, the bishops of certain cities began to gather more power. *The leading center of Western Christianity became Rome and in Eastern Christianity, Constantinople.* The bishop of

Rome—who would become known as the “Pope” began to become a more influential figure in the church.

The Medieval Times 590-1517

The Church and Power:

-*During the Middle Ages, the Church reached its height of power and influence.* It had become not only a religious force, but a political (The Holy Roman Empire) one (which caused some problems). Every aspect of life for the average person of Europe was affected by the Church. The Pope becomes the most powerful man in Europe.

-Christianity began to face threats from a new religion that arose out of Arabia, Islam. Islam aggressively expanded and took over many areas of the Middle East and North Africa, which contained some of the most ancient Christian communities. They even began to threaten areas of Europe. If it were not for the victory of Charles Martel at Tours, France, in 732 Muslims may have overtaken Europe.

-The rivalry between west (Rome) and east (Constantinople) continued to grow until the *Great Schism of 1054* where a major split in Christianity took place leading to the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox branches of Christianity, which continues to this day.

-The Crusades were military campaigns to retake the Holy Land from Muslims that began under Pope Urban II in 1095 and lasted until 1291. Despite some initial success, the Crusades ultimately failed in their goals.

-By 1500, the Middle Ages, and the dominance of the Roman Church over Western Europe were coming to end and the Renaissance and period of Reformation would begin.

The Lutheran Reformation

Conditions in Western and Central Europe at the time of Luther

-*The Roman Catholic Church had huge influence and power over politics, economics, education, and religious and daily life.* However, this was not a good thing. Corruption had become common in the Church. The common people could not understand most of the mass (services at church) as they were in Latin. People were not allowed to read the Bible. *Many false teachings had grown and become established in the church over the centuries—the most serious problem being the distortion of salvation in Christ alone, by grace alone, through faith alone.* Indulgences were being sold which promised time off of or release from purgatory (an unbiblical teaching that after people died they had to pay for their sins in this place until they were pure enough to enter heaven).

-God was generally viewed as a stern judge and *people lived in fear* of being damned if they were not good enough. There was little emphasis on the mercy, grace (rightly understood), and love of God.

-Death, and fear of it, was a very present reality as many people died fairly young, including many children soon after birth. Poverty and disease (including the plague) were rampant.

At this point in the class, we will view and discuss the documentary, *Martin Luther, The Idea That Changed the World*. There are discussion questions provided for each part of the film.

A Very Brief Overview of the Non-Lutheran Reformation

Martin Luther is seen as the pivotal figure of the Reformation and credited with beginning it with the nailing of the Ninety-Five Thesis in 1517. But the Reformation was not confined to a few German provinces, nor to the theology of Luther. However, without the success of Luther, very likely the Reformation would not have gained traction in other areas.

Lutheranism would gain hold and expand in many areas of Germany, throughout Scandinavia, and in some other areas of Europe.

Switzerland

Switzerland was a hotbed of Reformation activity. The key early leader of the Reformation in Switzerland was Ulrich Zwingli, who was born just one year after Luther in 1484 and was also a priest. Encouraged by the actions of Luther he also translated the Bible and said it was the final authority as opposed to Rome. Zwingli would go much further than Luther in removing many of the traditions of the church, including removing all religious images and private confession. The Reformation in Switzerland would also become violent and Zwingli died as a result of battle with his Roman Catholic opponents in 1531.

The Radical Reformation

The movie touched on this, but many of the reformers went much further than Luther and even Zwingli in some regards. The Anabaptists (re-baptizers) rejected infant baptism, all political and religious hierarchy outside of the local church, and any Christian involvement in civil society. They advocated a completely separate Christian society, believed that the Holy Spirit was still giving new revelation through prophets, and believed that the return of Jesus was imminent. The spiritual descendants of the Anabaptists today are the Mennonites and Amish and certain aspects of their theology are also reflected in what is commonly called "Fundamentalism".

John Calvin

After Martin Luther, John Calvin is the most influential reformer. He was born in France in 1509 and died in 1564 so his life overlapped some with Luther, but his main contributions began later than Luther's. John Calvin was forced to flee France and found refuge in Geneva, Switzerland. Like Luther and Zwingli, Calvin placed an emphasis on the Bible as the final authority and spoke of grace and faith. His most enduring work is *The Institutes of Christian Religion*. Calvin's theology was much more "systematic" than Luther and he like Zwingli wanted a larger break with the traditions of the church. Calvinism stresses the sovereignty and glory of God. His view on predestination differed from Luther. Calvin influenced many denominations that are known as "Reformed" the most prominent being Presbyterianism. John Knox (1513-1572), who would

lead the Reformation in Scotland, was a strong Calvinist. The Reformation in the Netherlands (Holland) was also Calvinist.

England

England would break from Rome not primarily for theological reasons, but because King Henry VIII wanted to divorce his wife Catherine and marry Anne Boleyn. By 1534 the King had established himself as the head of the Church of England. There was much back and forth between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism in the following decades (Bloody Mary in the 1550s) but during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603) Protestantism was permanently established. The Anglican Church is an interesting mix theologically, but retained many Roman Catholic elements. The Puritans (strongly Calvinist) felt the Reformation had not gone far enough. They were eventually persecuted and many left England, including tens of thousands who would settle in Colonial America.

Catholic Response (Counter Reformation)

Protestantism gained a following in other areas as well, including France. The Huguenots (French Protestants) were ultimately unsuccessful in moving France to the Protestant side (about 100,000 Huguenots were killed). The time period featured several wars and conflicts between Protestants and Roman Catholics as Rome saw its grip on Western Europe shattered. But Rome was able to regroup and keep their losses from being even larger. The Council of Trent (1545-1563) issued some reforms (including relating to indulgences) and reaffirmed many Roman Catholic doctrines. The Jesuits were formed and aggressive efforts were made to unite the Roman Church against the Protestants. Most of Southern and Eastern Europe remained Roman Catholic and missionaries took their message to the new colonies that were being set up by Catholic nations such as Spain, Portugal, and France in the New World.

Brief Highlights of Church History, Post-Reformation With a Focus Especially on the U.S

The Enlightenment about 1648-1789

The Enlightenment was a philosophical movement that came out of northern Europe that emphasized the use of reason, logic, and the scientific method. It emphasized the individual freedoms of people. While the Enlightenment spurred some very helpful political and social reforms, *many of its leaders were not supportive or even hostile to orthodox Christianity*. They generally rejected the Bible as an inerrant source of truth. Miracles could not happen, they argued, because they were against the natural laws of science and defied reason. Most in the Enlightenment did not reject the existence of God completely, but saw God very differently than how He truly is. *Deism* was a belief that God created the universe, set up a system of scientific laws for it to operate on, and then largely stays distant and uninvolved. Enlightenment thinkers also generally saw people as by nature good.

The First *Great Awakening* had a big impact, especially in the American colonies and in England during the 1730s and 40s. It was lead by Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield. The Methodist movement also grew rapidly. It was led by brothers John and Charles Wesley. It began as a movement within Anglicanism, but eventually separated into its own denomination and would also later splinter into

other groups as well. The Great Awakening placed a large emphasis on the sinfulness of mankind and its need for a savior.

Rising Influence in the 19th Century (1800s)

The 19th Century is viewed historically as a great decade of expansion in both numbers and influence for Christianity. Missionaries went out from the United States and Europe to many areas of Africa (example of David Livingstone) and Asia. The Second Great Awakening swept through the United States in the early 1800s. It focused on individual conversion and holy living as seen by the most famous Evangelist of the early 1800s named Charles Finney. Many of the *reform movements* of the time (including the movement to abolish slavery) were led by people of faith.

By the end of the 1800s, America was much *more diverse religiously* than it had been in earlier years. New groups, such as the Mormons, had formed. Immigrants brought with them their religion from Europe. By the mid 1800s, the Roman Catholic Church had become the largest single religious group in the United States in most part because of immigrants. Large numbers of Jews and Eastern Orthodox would enter the United States during the late 19th and Early 20th Centuries.

The Modern and Post-Modern World (about 1900-present)

By the early 20th Century the world was becoming much more urbanized (people living in cities), industrialized, and globally connected as transportation and communication sped up. Christianity faced new challenges and opportunities. The idea of "*higher criticism*" took hold in the seminaries of Europe and was exported to the U.S. These higher critics rejected ideas that Christianity was "outdated" and organized religion had limited value. But unfortunately, they were heretical in many ways. This theological school did not accept all of the Bible as true and believed it was a historical document to be studied and dissected like other historical documents. They often rejected many miracles as literally true and some would even reject the resurrection of Jesus. So essentially, Christianity had value as a moral force in the world (the Social Gospel) and this was focused on rather than justification and eternal life.

A divide occurred in the U.S. (and in other places) between "modernists" and "*fundamentalists*". The Pentecostal and Fundamentalist movement gained strength in the early 1900s through revivals and publishing materials in support of its views. This movement did much good in holding to the Bible as divinely inspired and inerrant, but it had weaknesses especially in falling into areas of legalism.

After World War II, Christianity surged in the U.S. and church attendance reached record levels. *Ecumenism* (various denominations working together) also surged in popularity. While it is good for Christians to be in harmony, often times ecumenism can involve compromising or de-emphasizing doctrine. Billy Graham, a Southern Baptist evangelist, became very popular and influential largely through his use of mass meetings called Crusades. American *Evangelicalism* grew rapidly.

The Roman Catholic Church also underwent large changes through a council called *Vatican II*. In 1962 it issued changes that included allowing mass to be celebrated in the local languages and allowing for individual Roman Catholics to read the Bible. They did not, however, alter their views on the authority of the Pope nor did they clearly embrace justification by faith alone.

In the late 1960s and through the 1970s, many societal changes took place. Large numbers of *people became suspicious of the government and large institutions like the church*. This was the time of the Civil Rights Movement (which was often led by religious leaders), the controversial Vietnam War, and

Watergate. This skepticism and changing moral attitudes led to drops in the influence of Christianity. Throughout the late 1970s-late 1990s, Evangelicals became politically active and were influential in elections.

As the 21st Century is now well underway, the United States has become a very diverse place. The Roman Catholic Church remains the largest religious group in the U.S., but there are more Protestants than Catholics when you add all of the groups together. Many people remain very dedicated to the Christian faith, but *secularism* (non religious views) is gaining strength (about 25% of the population does not identify with a particular religion). Much of the growth in Christianity in recent decades has been in what we call the “*global south*”-Latin American, Sub-Saharan Africa, and in many regions of Asia. While Bible-believing Christians face many challenges in modern America we can be sure of God’s promise to never leave nor forsake His people and that He will preserve His Church until Jesus returns on the Last Day.

The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS)

And information on other American Lutheran Church bodies

Beginnings

In the fall of 1838 almost 700 people boarded 5 ships in Germany and sailed for the United States of America. They were Lutherans under the leadership of *Martin Stephan*. They were seeking religious freedom in America. The state Evangelical (Lutheran) Church in Germany was compromising on doctrine as they had become influenced by rationalism. They also were pushing for more unity with other Protestants at the expense of the pure doctrine of Scripture as explained in the Book of Concord. Facing persecution, this brave band of Lutherans believed they could practice their Christian faith in good conscious in America where there was no state church.

In January of 1839 the ships landed in New Orleans and they would travel up the Mississippi River to *St. Louis, Missouri* (which to this day is the headquarters of the LCMS). The plan was to establish a settlement on land they had purchased south of St. Louis in Perry County. About 100 settlers moved there and began work. The early forefathers of the LCMS faced many struggles. Their leader, Martin Stephan had become very controlling and was eventually removed from leadership for financial and sexual offenses. He literally was sent out in a boat across the Mississippi. Many began to question the validity of their entire move to America. Fortunately, God would raise up a strong, spiritually mature leader in *Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm (C.F.W.) Walther*. On April 26, 1847, 12 pastors representing 14 congregations formed the *German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and other states*. From this humble beginning, the LCMS grew.

19th Century Growth

From 1845-1895 four million German immigrants entered the United States. The LCMS focused its outreach, often by laypeople, to these German immigrants. By the time of C.F.W. Walther’s death in 1887, *the LCMS had grown incredibly from 14 congregations to 2,000*.

Early 20th Century Challenges

When World War I broke out in Europe in 1914 it accelerated many changes that were taking place in the United States. *Anti-German sentiment grew* and the U.S. entered the war against Germany and its allies in 1917. It was during this time period that most *LCMS congregations moved away from using German as the primary language in its services and schools*. In the 1920s restrictive immigration laws were passed and the flow of immigrants came almost to a complete halt. The LCMS experienced a period when the membership began to decline.

The Lutheran Hour

The LCMS saw a shift in its mission focus being primarily to new immigrants to the population at large. *The Lutheran Hour began as a national radio broadcast in 1930 with Dr. Walter A. Maier as its speaker*. This program reached an audience of 20 million people. In the 1950s the Lutheran Hour would also expand to television with the program, *This Is the Life*. *Lutheran Schools have always been a big part of discipleship and evangelism in the LCMS* and they prospered during this time as well. The LCMS grew rapidly during the middle part of the 20th Century with, at its peak, saw a new LCMS congregation beginning every 3.5 days and membership in the LCMS reached 3 million people.

Late 20th Century Challenges

From 1972 at its statistical peak, the LCMS had experienced a slow but steady decline in membership. The reasons for this are varied. *The late 1960s and 1970s saw many changes in the U.S.* with changing moral views, racial and political unrest, and a growing distrust of “institutions” including organized religion. Families were having fewer children and the average age of LCMS members began to increase. American society has become more secular.

There were also challenges and divisions from within the LCMS. Theological views from the “higher critics” which challenged the inerrancy of the Bible made some inroads and a number of LCMS seminary professors held these views. Fortunately, the LCMS was able to re-assert correct teachings, but not until the president of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis was removed and many of the professors left in 1974 (this is known as “*Seminex*”).

The LCMS certainly faces challenges going forward, but the Lord has given us many things to be thankful for in our church body and is presenting us with many opportunities to reach out. When we stand on God’s Word and the Lutheran Confessions we know that we are on rock-solid ground. Jesus has promised to preserve His Church!

An overview of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod

Membership: 1.86 million

Congregations: 5,976

Schools: 1,100 pre-schools/child care centers, 750 elementary/middle schools, 130 high schools (including international), 7 colleges, and 2 seminaries (St. Louis, MO and Fort Wayne, IN)

President: Rev. Dr. Matthew Harrison (in his fourth term)

Publishing: Concordia Publishing House (CPH)

Radio: Lutheran Hour, KFUE radio

Church Fellowship: The LCMS is a member of the International Lutheran Council, which is made up of Confessional Lutheran Church bodies around the world. The LCMS is in pulpit and altar fellowship with 38 Lutheran Church bodies worldwide (meaning that we can share pastors and commune with these Christians). In the U.S. the only other Lutheran church body we are in pulpit and altar fellowship with is the American Association of Lutheran Churches, which has about 59 congregations.

Organization:

The LCMS has a president, rather than a pope or bishop as the head of our denomination. Our congregations generally own their own buildings and have a good bit of latitude to make decisions. To summarize, the denominational leaders have less “power” than in the Roman Catholic, Episcopal, or Presbyterian churches; but have more than a system like Baptists or Congregationalists.

Headquarters: The International Center in St. Louis, Missouri

Districts: The LCMS has 35 districts, 33 of which are geographical. We are part of the Florida-Georgia District, which is headquarters in Orlando (our district also includes the Bahamas).

Circuits: Within each district there are several circuits that include congregations in their area. We are part of the Northeast Georgia Circuit.

Congregations: Without congregations, none of these other levels of organization would be needed. The LCMS places a large emphasis on the local congregation.

Other American Lutheran Church Bodies

Note: Just because a church has “Lutheran” in the name does not mean that it holds to all of the orthodox teachings of the Church nor of the Book of Concord. Just like Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, etc. there are different denominations of Lutherans. In short, while there are similarities, not all Lutheran Churches believe the same thing. Many Lutheran Churches are not in pulpit and altar fellowship with each other.

Here are some of the larger Lutheran church bodies, but by no means all of them. Some Lutheran churches are also independent and not affiliated with a larger church body.

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)

The ELCA formed by the merger of three Lutheran Church bodies in 1988. These church bodies were formed largely by Scandinavian immigrants. It is much more theologically liberal than many other U.S. Lutheran church bodies. It is still the largest Lutheran denomination in the U.S, but it has experienced declining membership and large numbers of congregations leaving to form the LCMC and NALC.

Membership: 3.14 million

Congregations: 8,894

Headquarters: Chicago, Illinois

Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS)

This church body that was formed in 1850 by German immigrants. It is most theologically conservative of the three largest Lutheran church bodies in the U.S. The LCMS and WELS were in fellowship until 1961 when WELS broke fellowship.

Membership: 344,244

Congregations: 1,264

Headquarters: Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Lutheran Churches in Mission for Christ (LCMC)

Formed primarily from former ELCA congregations in 2001 and has grown since. It is more theologically conservative than the ELCA, but not as much as the LCMS or WELS.

Membership: 300,000 (estimate)

Congregations: 970

Headquarters: Canton, Michigan

North American Lutheran Church (NALC)

Formed primary from former ELCA congregations in 2010. Theologically on the conservative end of the spectrum, but not as much as LCMS or WELS.

Membership: 142,000

Congregations: 424

Headquarters: Hilliard, Ohio

Association of Free Lutheran Congregations (AFLC)

The AFLC is a pietistic Lutheran Church body and church government is highly congregation based.

Membership: 44,473

Congregations: 280

Headquarters: Plymouth, Minnesota

Evangelical Lutheran (Norwegian) Synod (ELS)

This small Lutheran church body is in fellowship with WELS.

Membership: 19,394

Congregations: 130

Headquarters: Mankato, Minnesota

Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC)

A small Lutheran Church body that was formed out of former WELS congregations. It is very theologically conservative and not in fellowship with other Lutheran church bodies.

Membership: 8,631

Congregations: 85

Headquarters: Eau Claire, Wisconsin