

The Perry County Project

(Events of the Saxon Emigration
to Perry County, MO., 1838)

Modern Christianity: CH 3031

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This paper will discuss the events of the Saxon Emigration of 1838. This migration of Saxon Lutherans is directly connected with the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. These Saxons came together with other conservative Lutherans in America in 1847 and established the Missouri Synod. We look briefly at what caused them to come to America, and who led them to America.

What caused these Saxon Lutherans to come to America?

To answer this question we need to see what was going on in Germany at this time. The economy in Saxon, Germany, was poor.

After a particularly hard winter in 1829 to 1830 the sufferings of the people had become so acute that they attracted the attention of the government. During the ensuing investigation of the country's economic status a pastor from the stricken areas testified as follows about the condition of the people: "All houses and other establishments are mortgaged. Much property is being auctioned off and sold. They are not able to pay taxes and parish dues..... Poverty prevails not only among the unskilled and day laborers, but also among the crafts and the peasantry." Begging was rare, stealing more frequent.¹

Adding to this is the simple historical facts that for many years Germany was affected by countless wars and plagues. Unoccupied land was scarce; families had been handing down land from generation to generation. As the population increased there wasn't an abundance of farmland to go around. So, from an economic stand point, there wasn't any great need to stay. Though many of these Saxon Lutherans were well-off in their native land, the economic possibilities could be better.

The economy could have possibly been one reason for the Saxon Lutheran migration. The greatest reason, however, was religion. Germany went through many religious movements after the Reformation.

¹ Walter O. Forster, *Zion on the Mississippi* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), 8.

A contest had begun already in the latter part of the sixteenth century and early part of the seventeenth with a clash between strict doctrinalism and syncretism. The latter was a movement which advocated the union of all Christian denominations on such common ground as could be found. Lutheranism spent its energies in the violence of the quarrel with syncretism, drifted into formalism, and became an easy prey to other forces—at first to Pietism and later to Rationalism.²

Without going into much detail it is sufficient to say that by the nineteenth century religion had gone through many changes, and the Lutheran church had been affected by these changes. The main problem these Saxon immigrants faced before they left Germany was the affects of Rationalism (reason to prove Scripture) and Unionism (uniting Lutherans and Reformed).

The following quotes show the way many of the immigrants felt about their situation in Germany, or at least the way historians reveal the situation was in Germany.

But we live in the most terrible times of thanklessness and of unbelief. Having departed from the bright light of the blessed teachings, one sees the following of foolish rationalism and false knowledge of the world at almost all places.This is likewise the condition of the Church in Germany.the German Lutheran countrymen on the other side of the ocean have mostly left the treasured ground of the faith of our Fathers. They have followed false teaching, false confession or have become loose and indifferent over against the church and school.

And this is what bothered most of us as we were on our home ground: Our conscience was burdened and was place in danger and fear. Besides, our children may eventually be swept in the stream.³

Pastor Loeber, in his journal, also mentioned being forced to deny the Unaltered Augsburg Confession and the forced merger of Prussia Lutherans and Reformed churches, which is known as the Prussian Union. This merger was to unite the Lutherans and Reformed. However, Pastor Loeber, also expressed his wish that they would have stayed in Germany to protest the Unionism. But says they were too weak in the faith,

² *Ibid.*, 9.

³ Rev. Gotthold Heinrich Loeber, translation by Vernon R. Meyr, *History of the Saxon Lutheran Immigration to East Perry County, Missouri in 1839* (Cape Girardeau, Missouri: Center of Regional History and Cultural Heritage, 1984), 1-2.

basically from being worn down from the battles they had already fought against the Union.

Another author comments about the situation in Germany.

At that time the pure Word of God was rarely heard in Germany. Especially in Saxony, unbelief had penetrated into all the classes of the population. Many ministers were rationalists and infidels. ...A church government composed of rationalists prohibited the use of old-Lutheran books in public worship.....From the pulpits little else than rationalism, the religious opinions of unconverted men, was preached.....the dim light of the Gospel was quite extinguished in most places both in churches and schools, and true Christianity became a thing which was not only rare, but hardly known.⁴

After commenting about the Church still existing among a few faithful pastors, he shows the attitude of the people in their desire to hear God's Word. "Their spiritual hunger and thirst was so great that they would often start on Saturday nights and walk many miles to a place where they could hear a true Lutheran preacher on Sunday."⁵

The last report we look at with this perspective of the situation is from the 150th Anniversary of Saxon Lutheran Churches to Perry County, MO.

To stay in Germany meant giving in to the principles of rationalism that had a stranglehold on the state church. In Germany in that day, all fundamental Scriptural and Lutheran teachings were put to the test of human reason. In other words, the question would be asked of every doctrine and practice: "Is it 'reasonable' or 'rational'?" The results of such a practice brought results like the following: The sacraments were generally regarded as "unnecessary, outmoded ceremonies." Unbelieving ministers baptized in the name of "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity". The Lord's Supper was regarded simply as some sort of memorial feast. Key doctrines regarding the only way of salvation such as "Justification by faith in Christ alone" or "Justification by grace alone" were considered hopelessly old-fashioned. Stress on prayer-life and devotional-life were strongly de-emphasized. Sermons no longer concerned themselves with a proclamation of sin and grace. Instead they became simple lectures on current events or other subjects of the day such as the advantages of stall-feeding cattle or

⁴ TH. Graebner, *Lutheran Pioneers: Vol. 1 Our Pilgrim Fathers*, (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1919), 3-4.

⁵ *Ibid*, 4.

planting trees. All ministers and teachers of the state who adhered to Biblical, Law-Gospel preaching were ridiculed and persecuted.⁶

Thus far the situation for these Saxon Lutherans seemed a dismal one. It seems they were surrounded by unbelief, and they were the only believers. There is, however, a different perspective of the situation in Germany. Carl S. Munding, disproves the dismal situation, that he says comes from many Missouri Synod writers. He explains how rationalism was slow to come into Saxony and mentions organizations that were set up to protect confessional Lutheranism. He mentions different men who stood up for confessional Lutheranism, and says about that time in Germany, “Of a truth, Lutheran theology was beginning to flourish, and men like Rudelbach sensed the dawn of a new day for the Christian Church.”⁷ (On an aside, Rudelbach was the man that warned Walther not to “basically” worship Martin Stephan, after Walther told Rudelbach that Stephan had saved his soul.)

Spiritual conditions in the individual congregations seem to be at or near normal. Church attendance is good, at least at the main service. Prayers are said at meals in the individual homes. Hymns are sung every Sunday afternoon under the direction of Father and Mother. Orphans are being cared for in private homes, and innumerable eleemosynary institutions are springing up all over Saxony.⁸

He also adds a quote from Pastor Keyl who had gone over to Perry County in the emigration and once had said to his people, “Whoever does not emigrate is no Christian.”⁹

⁶ Leonard Kuehnert, *Forward in Faith and Freedom: Celebrating 150th Anniversary of the Saxon Lutheran Immigration to Perry County, Missouri 1839-1989*, (Perryville, Missouri: Wehmeyer Printing Company, 1989), 3

⁷ Carl S. Munding, *Government in the Missouri Synod* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1947), 26

⁸ *Ibid*, 25.

⁹ Walter A. Baepler, *A Century of Grace* (Saint Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1947), 24.

When the blindfold was finally taken from Keyl's eyes, he wrote to Rudelbach from Perry county: "What an impudent lie to claim that there was no hope for the Lutheran Church, none in Saxony, none in Germany, none in all Europe! Incontrovertible facts show the very opposite to be true. What an assumption to pass judgment and condemn pastors and congregation members who still uphold the Confessions of our Lutheran Church!"¹⁰

What did cause these Saxon Lutherans to come to America? It does seem that the dismal situation of confessional Lutheranism and the circumstances this group faced was cause for them to flee. However, other sources show that the situation wasn't as dismal as it has been portrayed. One can not disagree that the religious situation in Germany was poor and detrimental to their faith, but the complete cause does not rest just on that. Much of the cause for them to leave was from the one who led them.

In the spring of 1838 Stephan declared that further postponement was impossible, and a committee was constituted which drew up a set of "Regulations for Emigrants." The cause, purposes, and aim of the emigration were stated as follows: "After calm and deliberate consideration the emigrants can see no possibility of maintaining their faith pure and unadulterated in their present home, and of preserving it for their descendants. Hence they are constrained in their consciences to emigrate, and to seek a country in which the Lutheran faith is not place in jeopardy, where they can serve God according to His revealed order of grace, and where they may enjoy, without, interference, the means of grace in their integrity and purity, and preserve the means of grace pure and unadulterated for their descendants. These means of grace include: the office of the ministry with full and free exercise of its duties, pure forms of worship, unadulterated preaching of the divine Word, the Sacraments in their original form, and the cure of souls unhampered in its ministrations....."¹¹

Who led them to America?

The leader of the Saxon Lutheran emigration in 1838 was Martin Stephan. Martin Stephan was born in 1777 in Moravia to Catholic parents who converted to Lutheranism. He was orphaned at a young age and took up a trade as a journeyman weaver. In Breslau,

¹⁰ Mundinger, *Government...*, 25

¹¹ TH. Graebner, *Lutheran Pioneers*, 5

he was befriended by local pietists who helped him continue his education at the *Gymnasium* and at the Universities of Halle and Leipzig. He became pastor at St. John's, Dresden, the capital city of Saxony, in 1810. As Pastor, at St. John's, he grew in popularity. He gathered a following of fellow clergymen, and also laymen both poor and wealthy. Because of the persecution this group faced in Germany, the decision was made that they migrate to America. Shortly after being established in the St. Louis/Perry County area (less than a year), Martin Stephan was excommunicated and banished from Missouri. He was rowed across the Mississippi river, lived a few years longer, and died in Illinois.

Here is what some have said about Martin Stephan:

In the sad state of affairs that we found ourselves, it was no small encouragement that we became acquainted with an elderly, respected and experienced preacher who for two decades had preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the crucified with strength and faithfulness in the capital city of Saxony. He had shown many souls the way to salvation. This was the pastor at the Bohemian-Lutheran Church in Dresden, Martin Stephan. He had attracted our attention and admiration because he preached the old, evangelical confessions for which reason he was much scorned and ridiculed by the world. A number of pastors and candidates and many friends (not in the quote, but a list of these pastors and candidates would reveal those considered as the founding Fathers of the Missouri synod) of God's Word looked to this man for advice and comfort in all kinds of difficult problems and in congregation matters of conscience which were brought on by the existing difficult pressures of the times. Stephan showed them from the Word of God how they could in faith and in life quiet their consciences. In this way he received the love and trust of his followers from near and far. But he did not walk righteously before God, living in secret sins which he covered with all kinds of outward goodness. He also ruled with loveless coercion of all kinds over the conscience of his followers. Even though his life caused numerous offenses, they were overlooked by us and he was not punished because of our unbelievable blindness and our subjugation to him.¹²

Stephan simply, yet eloquently, set forth the doctrines of sin and grace. He possessed the ability to comfort and strengthen those who came to him with stricken consciences, longing for the consolation of the Gospel. His activity far

¹² Loeber, *Saxon Lutheran Immigration*, 3.

transcended the limits of his Dresden parish. A number of pastors who clung to the old Lutheran faith were accustomed to seek counsel with him in their controversies with unfriendly government officials, and they accepted Stephan in the course of time as their spiritual leader.¹³

His powers of persuasion were abnormally strong. Men of learning and men of ignorance, men of wealth and men of poverty, were hypnotized by the spell of his spoken word and were persuaded to part with things most dear to their hearts. Among his follower were lawyers, clergymen, school-teachers, merchants, government employees of high rank, who were persuaded to give up positions that were bringing honor and yielding financial security. Women parted with their husbands, and mothers forsook their infant children in order that “they might follow Christ to America.” To some of his contemporaries he was a saint, to others Satan incarnate, to still others a psychological riddle.¹⁴

As the decade of the 1820s lengthened, Martin Stephan’s personal following grew, as did his influence over them. Before long this “ordained spellbinder”—like his American contemporaries of the same decade Robert Matthews and Joseph Smith—had founded a movement.¹⁵

It is difficult to comment much more on the life of Martin Stephan due to the different perspectives of the historians. Was Martin Stephan simply a leader of a movement, who simply brainwashed his followers, or was he a godly man, who fell victim to the sins of the flesh (greed, manipulation, sex, pride)? He was found guilty in America and excommunicated for pretty much the same thing he was on trial for in Germany and found not guilty. Yet, the same men that defended him in Germany after he was found not guilty, excommunicated him in America. Records show that Stephan never acted alone, but when it came down to making a decision what ever he said was followed. For example, in deciding how to get to America, a group of men discussed the options of going to New York first and making their way by land (where they had a

¹³ TH. Graebner, *Lutheran Pioneers*, 4.

¹⁴ Munding, *Government*, 41.

¹⁵ Mary Todd, *Authority Vested*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 25.

contact and it would be cheaper), or going to New Orleans and making their way up the river (which was more expensive and longer at sea). Though he missed out on the discussions Stephan simply said they were going to New Orleans because it would be easier to keep the group together and they would pick-up less stragglers that way. That was all fine and good until the end of the voyage at sea when Stephan had himself appointed as Bishop of the group and convinced the others in authority to sign a declaration confirming Stephan as their Bishop. The same was true when they got to St. Louis. There were a few different plots of land they looked at for establishing their colony, one was twelve miles south of St. Louis, the other was a hundred miles south (Perry County). Stephan chose Perry County, so that is where they went. And when they got to Perry County, instead of establishing proper housing and adequate supplies to live, Stephan had them building roads, bridges, and what would be his “palace”. There are many other interesting and questionable things involved with the Saxon Lutheran Emigration in 1838.

In my humble opinion, it seems Martin Stephan was a godly man who did fall victim to the sins of the flesh. The attention that he had gotten in Germany and the allegiance of men, led him to the sin of pride. He perhaps misused the blessings God had given him and used the Word of God to serve his own purpose (a warning to anyone who has been given the privilege of serving a flock of God’s people in the public ministry of the Gospel).

I see the Saxon Lutheran Emigration of 1838 as a sincere act of faith. Were the people involved misguided? Did they have to go to the extent of saying the people had to leave Germany or they would be damned? Was God purifying his church through

persecution and turmoil, so the truth of his Word would be proclaimed? I thank God for the freedom he has given us to proclaim the truth of his Word, without the hindrances that these Christians faced in Germany. I also thank God for the difficulties and hindrances he allows to come our way to strengthen our faith and lead us to trust in him alone.

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