

The Long Road to Lutheran Unity in Australia

ERICH RENNER



IT WILL BE NECESSARY TO BEAR in mind that the following survey will be somewhat selective. Many of the rifts among Lutherans in Australia were of minor significance, the details of which are fully treated and documented in the histories produced by authors in the past.¹ The major divisions and sticking points on the path to unity in congregations, synods, and churches in Australian Lutheranism will receive more concentrated attention.² If we look at Lutheran disunity in Australia there were serious issues which, though insignificant in themselves, could not be solved for many years, leaving painful scars on the life of these churches.

Before we explore the Australian Lutheran scene more fully, it may also be useful to remind ourselves that as long as the church of Christ has existed on this earth there have often been deep-seated problems leading to schisms and heresies. For example, the New Testament does not cover up the painful difficulties facing the Apostle Paul in his Corinthian church, where there were Pauline, Petrine, and Apollonic factions and even a Christ fellowship developing and threatening harmony. A study of church history reveals a continuing story of the dissensions that often developed to the detriment of the church at large. Sometimes these divisions were necessary and justified. From a Lutheran perspective the churches of the sixteenth-century Reformation were not spared their share of deformation and division.

With this in mind it may be helpful to begin with the reasons that brought about the coming of the Lutherans to the shores of this continent “down under.” The first immigrations of Lutherans (1838–1841) were fueled by the interference of the Prussian government under King Friedrich Wilhelm III, whose stringent measures included persecution of confessing Lutherans in his kingdom. They had refused to comply with his demands that Lutherans and the Reformed must unite into one church with a common agenda.

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Pastor August L. C. Kavel, founding pastor of Lutherans in South Australia, with his congregation and others, courageously resisted such sinful “unionism”—a word that would play a significant part in later union negotiations in South Australia—and remained loyal to the Confessions of their church, which they held had been normed by the Holy Scriptures and therefore were “*extra controversiam*.” Their decision to come to Australia was fraught with great difficulties. After protracted refusals by the Prussian government to allow them to emigrate, Kavel’s people finally came to Australia, having been aided by a generous benefactor in London, George Fife Angas. Settlement in a new country of freedom had its many problems after their arrival in 1838. Another batch of Lutherans came three years later under Pastor Gotthard D. Fritzsche, who had been persuaded by his people to make the long journey south. Unfortunately, theological differences between the two leaders soon arose, leading to the separation at the Bethany–Tanunda synod in 1846, a break that would last until 1966 when by God’s grace alone a union was reached.

This 1846 synod meeting got off to a shaky start. Without consulting his colleague, Fritzsche had invited to the meeting two missionaries from the Dresden Mission Society who had come to work among South Australia’s aboriginal people. Like Fritzsche, these missionaries were opposed to the “Apostolic Constitution” that Kavel had produced and on which he stood, firmly basing his theology, as he believed, on the New Testament Scriptures. While this Apostolic Constitution contained democratic aspects, it was on the whole theocratic in its

1. The standard histories are A. E. R. Brauer, *Under the Southern Cross*, ed. P. G. Strelan (Adelaide: Lutheran Publishing House, 1956); Theodor Hebart, *The United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Australia (U.E.L.C.A.)* (North Adelaide: Lutheran Book Depot, 1938); Everard Leske, *For Faith and Freedom: The Story of Lutherans and Lutheranism in Australia 1838–1996* (Adelaide: Openbook Publishers, 1996); David Schubert, *Kavel’s People*, revised and expanded edition (Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 2013); F. O. Theile, *One Hundred Years of the Lutheran Church in Queensland* (n.p.: Publications Committee of the Queensland District, U.E.L.C.A., 1938); and W. H. Paech’s history of the Lutheran Church in Victoria and Tasmania, *Twelve Decades of Grace* (Adelaide: Lutheran Publishing House, 1974).
2. Last year—2013—marked the 175th year of the coming of a pioneer congregation from Germany to South Australia. This was appropriately celebrated last April at the Lutheran Church of Australia’s General Convention in Adelaide.

approach to church order. In this respect, Kavel may have been influenced by Professor Johann G. Scheibel of the University of Breslau, Silesia, whose influence on the “Old Lutherans” (*Alt-Lutheraner*) was powerful. Scheibel believed the right constitution for the church according to biblical principles could be found in Paul’s letters to Timothy.

To digress briefly, the Apostolic Constitution was amended a number of times. In the earliest days, Kavel insisted that in the section dealing with church discipline, the committal to Satan of an impenitent offender in the church should remain (1 Cor 5:11). It was pointed out to him that Paul’s action was a specific individual case that cannot apply to all instances. In this context it may be added that the term “theocracy” was strongly held by Kavel. Indeed, he believed the church was a pure theocracy with Christ as its head and monarch. Pastors and elders had no authority beyond their spiritual oversight (Rom 12:8; 1 Cor 12:28; 1 Tim 5:17).

On the agenda was what Pastor Kavel called “Protestations” against the Lutheran Confessions.

Pastor J. C. Auricht, Kavel’s successor at the Langmeil Church in Tanunda, maintained that Kavel was led into the truth of God’s word in this matter. Professor F. Blaess of Concordia Seminary in Adelaide maintained that Kavel’s position was due to the persecution in Prussia. The only way the church could survive was by good order, hence a constitution was vital. Blaess writes: “Regulations and applications of this principle developed from a wrong exegesis of Scripture passages. . . . [Thus Kavel] introduced into the Church Constitution unsound elements.”³

Returning to the 1846 Bethany synod meeting, we find that on the agenda was what Pastor Kavel called “Protestations” against parts of the writings of the Lutheran Confessions. Unfortunately in his haste, he left the meeting before they could be discussed. Some matters on the agenda were as follows: (a) the conversion of Israel and its return to the promised land; (b) the reign of Christ on earth for a thousand years, based on Revelation 20, during which time Satan would be bound and the Jews would be converted; (c) Kavel’s protest against the Confessions in respect to the three sacraments; (d) his protest against the prayers for the dead as expressed in the Confessions.⁴ No settlement of these issues could be found. In the following year, Fritzsche published a 144-page rebuttal of Kavel’s “Protestations.”

One of the chief theological matters that simply would not go away was point (b) above, concerning the millennial reign of Christ. It is clear that Kavel was an indefatigable believer in a premillennialist interpretation of Revelation 20. On this point, his position was as unrelenting and dogmatic as was his belief that the Pope was the antichrist. Kavel’s use of Revelation, which for most Lutherans belongs to the *antilegomena* (that is, the contested books), was not in accord with the Lutheran church, which did not accord the Apocalypse the same status in determining doctrine as the uncontested books (the *homologoumena*). So caught up was Kavel with these “last times” of Scripture that he frequently preached on the millennium at his Sunday services. At first the two pastors, Kavel and Fritzsche, tried to keep this issue low-key, but it would not go away. It therefore became a major contributor to the first serious division in a church that had severed itself from the “Egyptian” land of oppression, Prussian Germany.

In Fritzsche’s congregation in Lobethal, South Australia, there was also an unfortunate split. In this case it was over moral matters, although here too the interpretation of the Scriptures was involved. A number of congregational members had been at a wedding after which dancing took place. As a result the members were excluded from the congregation and asked to repent, because they had caused offense by breaking the Sixth Commandment. On 14 April 1854, an approach from the so-called offenders was sent to the General Church Council in which they asked for a hearing:

We petition you, because this exclusion has spread further and caused much unrest in the congregation, for an investigation as soon as possible because the salvation of our souls depends on this exclusion if it is implemented justly (Matthew 18:15–18). With our request we entreat the honourable General Church Council not to neglect their office in this matter . . . and we sign with the greatest esteem.⁵

While a meeting was arranged, a rift nevertheless eventuated. It is one of a number of examples of sad divisions taking place in a small church that was apparently influenced partly by pietistic and literalistic interpretations and applications of the Scriptures.

Further differences, later on, were the result of the legacy that immigrants to Australia brought with them from a range of confessional standpoints. Many European immigrants came not for “faith and freedom,” as the early arrivals did, but for economic improvement and stability. They were, as one historian reported, “Lutherans, Reformed, unionists, Moravian brethren, chiliasts and anti-chiliasts, orthodox Lutherans and liberals, pietists and worldlings.”⁶ It can be appreciated that this diversity of emphases and beliefs that they held was not conducive to bringing about combined worship and harmony.

3. F. Blaess, “The Apostolic Church Constitution,” *Australasian Theological Review* 36 (1965): 18.

4. Brauer, *Under the Southern Cross*, 138.

5. Translation from a diary in the Lutheran Archives, Adelaide, by Lois Zweck.

6. Siegfried Hebart, “The Lutheran Church in Australia,” *Lutheran World Review* 2 (1949–1950): 35.

If we turn to the ecclesiastical scene in the eastern and northern states of the Australian continent,⁷ where contacts with the southern state were curtailed by distance, it can be understood why the Lutheran settlements there often went their own different ways. In Queensland, the large northeastern state, the Lutheran church traces its origins to the advent of Gossner missionaries from Berlin, where Pastor Johannes Gossner was stationed. The coming of Scandinavian Lutherans to the north complicated hopes for the unity of church congregations, since the language question proved a hurdle for joint worship and fellowship until the United German and Scandinavian Synod of Queensland and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Queensland reached agreement in 1921.

The Gossner Sendlinge from Berlin had been ordained in the state church of Prussia, which was a “unionistic” church. Then, too, an assistant pastor who came to Queensland had his theological training in Basel and was therefore also a committed unionist. The Basel seminary, as we shall see later, became a bone of contention when negotiations began with the confessional Lutherans in the south. In the north and also in the east, interdenominationalism in respect to worship and communion were the order of the day.

Siegfried Hebart described the search for unity among Australian Lutherans in the nineteenth century as “a despairing task. One is confronted by a veritable maze of synodical amalgamations and separations and almost up to the turn of the century (1900) chaos and division seem to be the determining forces in the life of the church.”⁸

During the nineteenth century there were also a number of synod meetings held with the various factions; one was called the Langmeil and Light Pass Synod and the other the Bethany–Lobethal Synod. A pastor from Germany came to the Barossa Valley of South Australia and during his ministry was partly responsible for another division that led to another synod named the Tanunda–Light Pass Synod. With the coming of pastors from Hermannsburg, Germany, to Australia on mission fields, a so-called Confessional Union took place in 1863 between the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Australia (ELSA) and the Immanuel Synod. This union became the foundation for a new mission venture among indigenous people in the remote Cooper’s Creek area in northern South Australia. The “Confessional Union” was indeed a great blessing and showed how cooperative service could be fruitful and influential. Unfortunately the “union” only lasted ten years.

It may be safely contended that the four seminaries in overseas localities (Basel in Switzerland, Hermannsburg and Neuendettelsau in Germany, and St. Louis in the United States of America) played a major theological role through the influence of their Sendlinge on the Lutheran ecclesiastical and theological scene in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. We may draw attention to the fact that this was a valuable input,

on the one hand, but on the other hand, this made attempts for unity more complicated. For example, when the Hermannsburg Mission Institute became part of the State Church in Germany, this led to a division in our Australian Church. Part of this church called itself the ELSA “*auf alter Grundlage*,” that is, “on the old basis,” as it seceded from the ELSA. The entry of Basel pastors into Victoria and South Australia was also to become a long-standing hindrance to any rapprochement between the confessional Lutherans, especially those who had come under the influence of St. Louis, with its orthodox theology.

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During the latter part of the nineteenth century there were basically three mainline churches that stood out among the splinter groups as indicated earlier: (1) the *General Synod*, with Basel proclivities, led by President Herlitz in Melbourne, in the state of Victoria; (2) the *Immanuel Synod*, influenced by the Neuendettelsau men; and (3) the ELSA, later called the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia (ELCA), which was influenced by The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.⁹

In the twentieth century, outside influences began to play a role, at least tacitly, in producing more cooperation between the Australian churches. The First World War (1914–1918) saw an anti-German attitude develop against the Lutherans, especially since German was employed in worship and in schools. This was instigated by politicians, both at federal and state levels, who made anti-Lutheran statements. In 1917 they closed all Lutheran schools in South Australia, only to open them again in the 1920s. In the face of this widespread persecution of Lutherans, it is understandable that relationships between Lutheran churches became more amicable and cooperative.

After the war, there were attempts to bring about a union between the General Synod and the Immanuel Synod. On 21 March 1921, a union took place and thus the United Evan-

7. Australia is almost as large as the 48 mainland states of the United States.

8. Hebart, “The Lutheran Church in Australia,” 31.

9. The General Synod, based in Melbourne, was in many respects similar to the former General Synod in the United States. The Immanuel Synod had its roots in Neuendettelsau, Bavaria. Indeed, the Australian Lutheran College library is named in honour of Pastor J. P. Löhe, a great nephew of Wilhelm Löhe. J. P. Löhe served as parish pastor in southern Australia, then as founding principal of Immanuel College and Seminary, North Adelaide. On this site in 1968, Immanuel and Concordia Seminaries combined to form Luther Seminary, now known as Australian Lutheran College.

gical Lutheran Church of Australia (UELCA) came into being. The inaugural synod meeting in Ebenezer, South Australia, was a momentous occasion, graced by the President of the American Lutheran Church, Dr. Richter, and his wife. One of the important conditions for union was the promise that only pastors from Lutheran seminaries could enter the new church. Many positive effects immediately resulted from this union, including the decision to open a college and seminary named Immanuel in Adelaide, South Australia. Here ministers for Australia and missionaries to Papua New Guinea could be trained. During the war years, it had not been possible to prepare pastors overseas.

Dr. Hermann Sasse became lecturer in church history at the Immanuel Seminary, Adelaide, of the UELCA.

Fortunately for the ELSA, it had started seminary training well before this time. In 2012 the Lutheran Church of Australia (LCA) celebrated the hundredth anniversary of the graduation of the ELSA's first "Twelve Apostles" from Concordia Seminary in the southern Adelaide suburb of Unley. On this campus Concordia College and Seminary had been established in 1905, after beginnings in Murtoa, Victoria, in the 1890s.

On the way to Lutheran union a significant event took place with the merger of the "ELSA-on-the-old-basis" and the UELCA on 26 January 1926. The former group had broken away from the ELSA in 1902 on the issue of the Hermannsburg Mission association with the German state church. In 1926, "ELSA-on-the-old-basis" consisted of about 1375 communicants in six parishes. This merger appears to have been a special occasion celebrated in Tanunda with thanksgiving to God for such grace. The historian Theodor Hebart reports, "Thousands thronged to Tanunda to take part in what was probably the largest church gathering in the history of the Australian Lutheran Church."¹⁰

This merger left the two main Lutheran bodies on the continent, the UELCA and the ELSA, with the momentous task of finding ways and means to break the long-standing division and find the precious gift of union so necessary to overcome this scandal in the community. What would be on the agenda when they could meet in the dialogue for which Lutheran laypeople and some pastors were anxiously waiting? Growing frustration and impatience pressured the leaders to work for amalgamation "on the basis of Lutheran principles."

It was reported that when a layman was asked what the difference between the two churches was, he replied that it is "like two magpies: one is black and white, the other is white and black."¹¹ An Australian Lutheran Association made up of disenchanted laymen from various states, chiefly South Australia, was formed, which had on its agenda the vital matter of union. It received reports of presidents and committees, working for an intersynodical solution to the theological issues that were a hindrance to a united front.

After the Second World War many immigrants settled in Australia, coming chiefly from Germany and the Baltic States; they were often mystified that there could be two small Lutheran churches here. They themselves had been sorely affected by the catastrophic and soul-destroying events in their countries. At this time, Dr. Hermann Sasse and his family came on the Australian scene. He became lecturer in church history at the Immanuel Seminary, Adelaide, of the UELCA, after leaving behind his professorship at Erlangen University in Germany. He showed great sympathy for his fellow countrymen and appreciated the utter confusion in which they found themselves in respect to church matters. He was able to contribute richly and theologically in the intersynodical committees that had been formed in the 1940s to work on consensus between the two competing churches.

In those years it was understandably difficult to dialogue after the long years of separation, friction, and competitiveness. Without going into detail on the sticking points that had to be faced by the two committees, it should be said that a major hurdle was their inability to pray together. For the ELCA representatives, Romans 16:17–18 was the stumbling block: "Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly" (KJV). This barrier to joint prayer was only crossed after an ELCA Pastors' Conference in 1948, where thorough exegetical papers were read by their leading theologians. They concluded that it was possible to pray with their counterparts; it did not imply sinful "unionism." It was a great day in 1949 when the first prayer was prayed together by both groups, led by the cochairman of the committee representing the ELCA.

Shortly afterwards, in 1949, a joint Pastors' Conference was called at the Bethlehem Church (ELCA) on Flinders Street, Adelaide. The copious minutes show that, in many ways, it was a God-send; it brought about confessions from both "sides" that there had been serious wrongs done against one another. For many of the pastors present at this historic conference, it was a truly cathartic experience, never to be forgotten and always cherished.

A listing of matters that were dealt with in the intersynodical meetings may be in place here, coupled with a comment on the most controversial theses:

10. *Die Vereinigte-Lutherische Kirche in Australien* (V.E.L.K.A.) (North Adelaide: Lutheran Book Depot, 1938), 151.

11. The magpie is a black-and-white Australian bird.

1. Principles governing Church Fellowship
2. Joint Prayer and Worship
3. Conversion
4. Election
5. Office of the Ministry and the Church: pertaining to the ordination of women.
6. Eschatological Matters: this cluster of theses took much time to formulate and contains an introduction to hermeneutics. It is one of the longest set of theses and includes a section on the church's attitude to the Jews. After the union was enacted, it was necessary to reformulate the section dealing with the Pope as antichrist.
7. Scripture and Inspiration: this set of theses was constantly under discussion. It is not quite clear why this contentious subject was not on the agenda earlier. The main bone of contention had to do with the inerrancy of the Scriptures. After the union was enacted, it was found helpful to produce another series of statements, including the exegesis of Genesis 1–3.
8. The Lutheran Confessions.

A Joint Union Committee was also constituted to take up the many practical matters that understandably arise when an amalgamation of two separate well-established church bodies with properties, institutions, finances, and the like takes place. It worked smoothly and efficiently to see that in the united church there were no hindrances in proclaiming the word of God together. The final "Theses of Agreement" contained an appendix dealing with such matters as the following: (1) Lodges, (2) Marriage and Betrothal, (3) Marriage with a deceased wife's sister. There was no difficulty in finalizing them in the present form.

When everything seemed set for the long-awaited union, an agonizing issue emerged that held up a promising consensus. Church fellowship matters, described under points 1 and 2 above, required further debate. This was because the UELCA was a member of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and

was working with unionistic overseas churches on the Papua New Guinea mission field. The ELCA had resisted membership in the LWF, because it was not only a federation but also a church; it had a doctrinal statement in its constitution. Correspondence with the Geneva headquarters of the LWF by the President of the UELCA did little to allay the controversy. After years of promising progress, many thought the discussions might come to a traumatic end.

It was now left to the faculties of Concordia Seminary and Immanuel Seminary to attempt to find a satisfactory solution.

It was now left to the faculties of Concordia Seminary and Immanuel Seminary to attempt to find a satisfactory solution to this sensitive matter. After a series of meetings, they produced a carefully prepared statement that, with amendments by the Central Committee, was accepted. All overseas church fellowships, except the UELCA's commitment to the mission church of Papua New Guinea, would cease. These important decisions were subsequently agreed to by synods of both churches and included in the final Document of Union. The new Lutheran Church of Australia continued its work in human care through LWF field offices and sent observers to the International Lutheran Theological Conference, now known as the International Lutheran Council. After one hundred twenty years of disunity, a union had at last been reached in 1966, by the grace of God alone. "Kyrie Eleison, Hallelujah!" were on the lips of many thankful Lutherans of this continent. LOGIA

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