



1968: Strong Winds, Earthquakes, Fire, Gentle Whispers, and the Lutheran Church's Missed Opportunity

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How can so much change in one decade? The Lutheran minister Franklin Clark Fry was dubbed “Mr. Protestant” on the cover of *Time* magazine exactly ten years before the ever-memorable year of 1968.¹ Just one year earlier, according to a 1957 Gallup Poll, only 14 percent of Americans believed that religion was losing influence. By 1970, however, 75 percent of Americans thought religion was losing influence, and each of the top ten Protestant denominations was reporting a yearly decline in attendance—a hole in the boat that has remained “unrepaired.”² A decade after the crowning of Mr. Protestant, God was declared dead by the very same magazine.³ Everything seemed to be up for discussion. The religious snapshot below of the United States in 1968 shows renegotiations of

¹“Religion: The New Lutheran,” *Time*, April 7, 1958, <https://tinyurl.com/yb4pyz3p>.

²John Corrigan and Winthrop S. Hudson, *Religion in America: An Historical Account of the Development of American Religious Life*, 7th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2004), 414.

³“Is God Dead?” *Time*, April 8, 1966.

As things have developed within world Christianity over the past fifty years, the most important change has been the rise of the Pentecostal/charismatic movement. Did Lutheranism miss a valuable opportunity for renewal by neglecting this renewal process in its midst?

national ethics, the church and the public-school system separating, and seekers, the nonreligious, and other religious traditions increasing their numbers. A new and different American Christian landscape was starting to take seed. The question of the time was this: which churches would embrace what was happening, seeing it as an opportunity, and which would see danger in the ever-changing tides of culture and circle the wagons?

The year 1968 represents a disruptive pivot in American religious history. The future of any particular religious denomination, therefore, depended significantly on how it responded to these changes. Although it is important to survey the religious landscape, one of the most intriguing aspects of the year was the American Lutheran denomination's conscious rejection of one of the most powerful movements in American and global Christianity—the charismatic renewal. This was, of course, not the first North American renewal movement in which Lutherans stood to the side. Numerous authors have written on its place, or lack thereof, in the history of evangelicalism. Yet, the story of the church and its reactions to one of the greatest global Christian renewal movements in history does not get the consideration that it deserves. Certainly, the Lutheran denominations involved were not the only churches to make this deliberate decision, but Lutheranism's place in this story is not given proper scholarly attention and is often overshadowed by Roman Catholics and Anglican/Episcopalians.

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Such attention provides lessons not only into how the church got to its current position but also for the whole church in America.

THE SURROUNDING RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE

In many ways, not much has changed in the last fifty years. The anxiety of the loss of Christian influence on society, for example, is constantly lamented everywhere, including news programs, congressional debates, elections, memes on Facebook, the pulpit, classrooms, and the yearly Thanksgiving family argument. Yet, 1968 holds a unique place marker due merely to the fact that the rug was indeed being pulled out from under mainline Protestant Americans within an incredibly quick time span. Not only were numbers of church members plummeting after a religious revival in the 1950s, but the public square and other non-Christian religious groups were taking up a space in the country not seen before. Below is a brief exploration of 1968 ranging from ethics to law, to the expansion of religion in the United States as a whole. The anxiety and turmoil felt by those living in it was not imagined. The country was changing—and quickly.

ETHICS

It is hard to think of any other time period in which the ethical lines of the United States were more fluid than during the late 1960s and the 1970s. Within a staggeringly short amount of time, what had been considered good, bad, and moral was upended and rewritten. War, gender roles, sexuality, relationships with authority, race, religion, drugs, and lifestyle were all up for debate, much to the shock and disgust of institutions and people who had built their futures on the establishment. Some lament that the country never recovered from this time and has been in a downward spiral since, while others point to this time period as when women and minorities were able to finally push through old barriers to insist on being heard. No matter what position taken on the flexibility of the ethical boundaries of the time, the fact is that this was a distinctive time period in American history in which society's ethics were up for negotiation—no small feat.

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CHRISTIANITY IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE

Is America a Christian Nation? Whatever the answer, the fact remains that the 1960s saw a unique reversal of public Christianity within the court system that has continued at a remarkable speed to this day. Up until the 1960s, mainline Protestant Christianity and its expressions of religiosity held unprecedented public access and sway. Yet, what really began to manifest during this decade led not only to a Supreme Court that currently holds no Protestant Christians but also to a painful four-decade long process of determining what the First Amendment really means for the United States.

The First Amendment's clause on religion, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," put the microscope on the privilege of Christianity (Protestantism, to be more exact) and the rights of nonbelievers and minority religious communities. The cases under consideration by the Supreme and lower courts were numerous, but possibly the two most famous were those about school prayer and school-sponsored Bible reading. 1962's *Engel v. Vitale* (school prayer) and 1963's *Abington School District v. Schempp* (Bible reading in school) began a precedent of separating "church" and "state" (and what that actually means) that continues unabated today. Although only a handful of famous cases were heard during this decade, it should not be underestimated how these legal fights born in the beginning of the 1960s fully fed into the fear and perceived dissolution of society by 1968.

The legal landscape of the 1960s on religion and the public square was impactful but less obvious to the everyday citizen than the seeming droves of “kids” leaving the churches of their parents and the perceived onslaught of new religious groups from the Global East that shook Middle America.

THE BEGINNING OF THE GROWTH OF THE RELIGIOUS “OTHER”

In addition to the legal debate over Christianity's place within the public sphere, the burgeoning expansion of the “other” was beginning. Assuming the place of Protestant Christianity as the standard bearer of this particular time, the religious other that began to take root can be separated into two groups: the seekers and non-Western religious communities.

Seekers

Sociologist Wade Clark Roof deemed the baby boomer generation that was coming of age in the 1960s and '70s the “generation of seekers.”⁴ The seekers were a diverse and multifaceted group that includes what we now term “nones” (those who mix faiths, those who left the church, and those who joined alternative communities). Although a healthy percentage of boomers eventually returned to the churches that they rejected in their youth, sociologists have estimated that about 42 percent of this generation “dropped out” of church altogether in either total rejection of religion or in pursuit of other avenues.⁵

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The years leading up to and following 1968 saw an unprecedented number of young adults rejecting the faith of their childhood and either leaving religion altogether or joining/creating something never before seen by their parents or grandparents. This was the time period of the Jesus movement, intentional/alternative communities, Jim Jones, and the Hare Krishna. This was also the moment when crystals, mysticism, yoga, horoscopes, New Age spiritualism, and self-help began to rise in American pop culture.⁶ The genesis of the much lamented “cherry-picked”

⁴Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994).

⁵JoAnne Beckman, “Religion in Post-World War II America,” Duke University National Humanities Center, October 2000, <https://tinyurl.com/yahmkkm8>.

⁶To see more on how this has manifested into pop culture and religion today, look at Teena Booth, “Pew Poll Confirms New Age Movement is ‘Widespread’ and Growing,” *Looking for the New Age* (blog), December 10, 2009, <https://tinyurl.com/yb5wawaj>.

faith was beginning to take root. Basking in the glow of a religious, economic, and educational excess that no previous generation had yet seen, the boomer-seekers felt free to incorporate aspects of different traditions and philosophies according to their own particular partiality.

The East Comes West

The religious landscape of 1968 was one of struggle and confusion. On the one hand, the mainline church began to experience a quick decline in attendance and political/social power. On the other hand, new immigration laws were seeing a quick turnaround of influence on popular religious thought.

The gaining momentum of “seeker” spirituality found fertile ground due to the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which reversed restrictions on immigrants from Asia and Latin America. One religious group who greatly benefitted from the legal change were people from India:

Between 1871 and 1965, only 16,013 Indians had been admitted to the United States. Between 1965 and 1975, more than 96,000 were admitted. . . . [T]his change in the immigration [laws] also allowed a number of Hindu teachers to come to the United States.⁷

Granted, academics and “elites” had shown curiosity and interest in Eastern religions like Buddhism and Hinduism since the mid-nineteenth century, but the 1960s ushered in an acceptance and normalization of Eastern thought that continues to thrive fifty years later. For an example of this, just look toward the commonplace use of yoga and self-help by churches all across the country.⁸

Although this all fed into the national narrative, the late 1960s are rarely talked about as a glimpse into the future of American Christianity in modern scholarship. That position is usually given to evangelicalism/fundamentalism. Unquestionably, conservative Christianity, like the Moral Majority,⁹ was waiting to expand dramatically in about another decade, but what of the outbreak of the charismatic renewal among the mainline church? Pentecostalism and the charismatic have had a global reach never before seen—and the Lutheran Church was right there at the beginning of their modern explosion.

1968: THE REJECTED INVITATION TO RENEWAL

Evangelicalism was a strong religious renewal movement in response to cultural changes in the United States. It is most certainly true that evangelicalism,

⁷ Graham Dwyer and Richard J. Cole, eds., *Hare Krishna Movement: Forty Years of Chant and Change* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 16.

⁸ For more on this topic, see “Many American Mix Multiple Faiths,” Pew Research Center: Religion and Public Life, December 9, 2009, <https://tinyurl.com/yc2wgt7l>.

⁹ Many deem the very beginnings of this movement to be the “I Love America” rallies of Jerry Falwell in 1976.

fundamentalism, and the “Religious Right” have a powerful influence on the current political, religious, and social landscape. When speaking of rising forces in today’s Christian America, it is these American conservative perspectives that take center stage, and rightfully so in many ways. Yet, as important as the evangelical movement has been, there was an even larger and more globally influential Christian revival brewing in the 1960s that eclipses the conservative movement in strength and influence—the charismatic gifts of the Spirit.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the World Christian Database reported that at least a quarter of the world’s two billion Christians were thought to be members of Pentecostalism and related charismatic movements, which see speaking in tongues, divine healing, and prophesying as central to their faith.¹⁰ The charismatic movement of the 1960s and ’70s was a religious renewal manifest among mainline churches, which eventually either moved elsewhere, to individual faith or to the large denominations we see today. Although predominately seen as a development that initially infiltrated the Roman Catholic and Anglican/Episcopalian churches, the charismatic renewal spread throughout most mainline churches, and the various Lutheran church groups were no different. Yet, in spite of the groundswell of spiritual renewal that made its way through the Lutheran denominations, the charismatic renewal never quite managed to make a long-term impact on leadership or denominational structures.

Looking back, however, it is hard not to see the failure of any Lutheran denomination to change due to the charismatic renewal as a failure to join one of the brightest stars of the future Christian landscape.

AMERICAN LUTHERANS AND THE HOLY SPIRIT

In 1968, Lutherans were in turmoil over the Holy Spirit. Of course, hindsight is 20/20. There was no way for *any* of the mainline denominations to realize that spiritual gifts would end up becoming such a mammoth movement on the global Christian scale. Looking back, however, it is hard not to see the failure of any Lutheran denomination to change due to the charismatic renewal as a failure to join one of the brightest stars of the future Christian landscape. Although most Lutheran branches experienced some sort of charismatic connection, the American Lutheran Church (ALC) and the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) show the most interesting interactions with this renewal during the late 1960s.¹¹

¹⁰“Spirit and Power—A 10-Country Survey of Pentecostals,” *Pew Research Center: Religion and Public Life*, October 5, 2006, <https://tinyurl.com/ybp9yu29>.

¹¹ The LCA (Lutheran Church in America) also experienced a charismatic renewal, but it began later than others, in the 1970s and 1980s.

Lutheran Church Missouri Synod

Although there were seeds of the charismatic within the Missouri Synod twenty years earlier, it was not until the 1960s that the renewal really made an impact—and 1968 was a watershed year. This was the year of the first gathering of the Missouri Synod charismatic pastors held in Crystal City, Missouri, attracting forty-four self-proclaimed charismatic pastors. Within three years, at their meeting at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, the number of pastors claiming baptism of the Holy Spirit had grown to two hundred.¹² As one “converted” pastor stated, “It was obvious to me that my own ministry lacked the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit. Certainly souls had been saved through the preaching and teaching of the Gospel. But what about the other works that Jesus did?”¹³

The Missouri Synod leadership needed to figure out what was happening with the concerning surge of charismatic claims, not only in their own church but also in the national mainline church. As an official publication stated, “it has touched nearly every Protestant denomination in our own country as well as in many foreign countries. In spite of warnings by denominational leaders and even the removal of pastors from their charges, the movement seems to increase in influence.”¹⁴ At the request of the president of the Synod, the Commission on Theology and Church Relations began a study on the charismatic movement with special emphasis on baptism in the Holy Spirit in 1968.¹⁵

The commission covered sociological and psychological aspects, as well as any theological support this grassroots group may have had. Psychologically, the writers wrote that their data showed inconclusive results:

Although disturbed individuals may be attracted to the movement, there is no evidence that they exist in greater proportion within this movement than within the organized church. It is quite possible that the disturbed may be attracted because of their great need of help, and they may even do or say bizarre things as a manifestation of their illness, but it is not the result of the dynamics of the movement of the report claimed “inconclusive” results.¹⁶

Numerous Lutheran charismatics expressed disagreement with the findings and methodology. Even so, the theological and biblical analysis was the most impactful section.

Lutherans stirred by the movement insisted that their baptism in the Holy Spirit supplemented Lutheran doctrine, rather than ever contradicting it. Yet, the authors

¹² “The Charismatic Movement and Lutheran Theology: A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod,” January 1972, 5, PDF, <https://tinyurl.com/ycfo84h7>.

¹³ “Charismatic Movement and Lutheran Theology,” 6.

¹⁴ “Charismatic Movement and Lutheran Theology,” 5.

¹⁵ “Charismatic Movement and Lutheran Theology,” 5.

¹⁶ “Charismatic Movement and Lutheran Theology,” 7.

conceded little in their favor. According to the report, even the commonly shared phrase “filled with the Holy Spirit” was not biblically backed in favor of the renewal.

Thus the expression “filled with the Holy Spirit,” as it is used in Scripture, very frequently has no apparent relationship to charismatic gifts. Consequently, it is often used in conjunction with such terms as “wisdom” or “faith” (Acts 6:3). Men full of the Spirit are children of God whom the Spirit has endowed with the gift of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord (1 Cor 12:3), as well as gifts and talents that enable them to serve Christ and their fellowmen in the church.¹⁷

Continuing on the basic and widely held premise among charismatics that the gifts provided by the Holy Spirit to the very first believers were and are still available, the authors stated:

While Lutheran theologians have at times differed in their understanding of the term “baptism with the Holy Spirit,” they have rather consistently held that the extraordinary charismatic gifts mentioned in Acts and 1 Corinthians were no longer given after the close of the apostolic age. . . . It is noteworthy that the Scripture nowhere promises or encourages us to hope that extraordinary charismatic gifts will become the possession of the Christian church throughout the centuries. The pattern set in Scripture may actually indicate the opposite.¹⁸

Although the conclusions and majority of the report seem to send a specific signal to the new uprising of claimed charismatic gifts within their own church, the authors were still unable to fully condemn the movement as was obviously their desire: “The church, therefore, will not reject out of hand the possibility that God may in His grace and wisdom endow some in Christendom with the same abilities and powers He gave His church in past centuries.”¹⁹ Nevertheless, the message was sent that such religious renewal was not accepted by the church and would not be supported by the leadership, thus pushing proponents either to release their new beliefs or to hide them from others.

American Lutheran Church

Following the death of her son in Vietnam in 1968, Betty Denny was searching for something. She eventually found it among a charismatic religious group and was shortly thereafter baptized in the Holy Spirit. According to her husband, Dick, his wife was so changed that he wanted the same thing for himself. They soon joined North Heights Lutheran Church in St. Paul where the Dennys claimed, “We had manifestations of the Holy Spirit as in 1 Corinthians 12, with physical healings, we learned hands-on how to deal with demons. We had a sense of expectancy, we

¹⁷ “Charismatic Movement and Lutheran Theology,” 15.

¹⁸ “Charismatic Movement and Lutheran Theology,” 24.

¹⁹ “Charismatic Movement and Lutheran Theology,” 25.

expected God to do things and God delivered.”²⁰ Dick Denny quickly took on a leadership position in the church and within four years, just by word of mouth, sponsored an event on charismatic gifts attended by nine thousand people. Three years after that, the annual Holy Spirit conferences in Minneapolis had twenty-five thousand in attendance.²¹ Yet, with members and clergy claiming influence and inspiring thousands in a church renewal, the ALC never showed any hint of charismatic influence in leadership or the wider denomination.²² How is that so? Death by avoidance.

Perhaps the best way to sum up the ALC approach was “benign neglect,” because instead of exploring the challenges presented, they ignored it to the extent they were able.

Of all American Lutheran denominations, the ALC was the first to officially examine charismatic gifts, beginning in 1961. By 1963, a committee to investigate the “neo-Pentecostal” activity in four congregations was convened by sending a psychiatrist, a psychologist, and a theologian to interview members. The committee found no mental or emotional difference between those claiming to experience divine gifts and those who did not.²³ In spite of that, at their convention the same year, the *Report on Glossolalia* stated that “there has been enough talking about glossolalia in our Church and that further publicity would fan the flames and do more harm than good.”²⁴ Just like their Missouri Synod brethren, the leadership of the ALC saw the movement as potentially harmful to their church body and, in spite of an undeniable growth from lay and clergy, expressed the need to see it die out not from any aggressive stance but instead from negligence and ambivalence. Which it inevitably accomplished. According to Rev. Charles Miller, perhaps the best way to sum up the ALC approach was “benign neglect,” because instead of exploring the challenges presented, they ignored them to the extent they were able.²⁵

THE GREEN HYMNAL PROJECT

In 1965, an unprecedented ecumenical work began. The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod invited other Lutheran denominations to work together in order to produce a hymnal combining all their traditions into one space—thus creating a uniform piety and worship.²⁶ The *Lutheran Book of Worship (LBW)* took over a

²⁰ Eric Jonas Swensson, “The Meaning of a Movement: Lutheran Charismatic Renewal,” Holy Trinity, <http://archive.is/uTHn8>.

²¹ Swensson, “Meaning of a Movement.”

²² The ALC reached about one million members in 1959. “American Lutheran Church (1930–1960),” Association of Religion Data Archives, <https://tinyurl.com/y93sjgnl>.

²³ Swensson, “Meaning of a Movement.”

²⁴ “A Report on Glossolalia,” cited in Killian McDonnell, *Charismatic Renewal and the Churches* (New York: Seabury, 1976), 45.

²⁵ Swensson, “Meaning of a Movement.”

²⁶ *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1978), 7.

decade to produce and lost some denominations in the process; what is most telling in this effort to bring together all Lutheran traditions was who was excluded. By effectively silencing the voice of those embracing charismatic renewal, the *LBW* became a Lutheran ecumenical rejection of this emerging piety.

It can be seen as normal human nature to grasp onto the past when modern reality seems out of control. The *LBW*, in its efforts to unify the traditions of North American Lutherans, embraced so much of its past traditions that some would notice its strong Roman Catholic or monastic themes. It could be deduced that with so much changing, the safest bet was to stake Lutheran identity within the Roman Catholic liturgical renewal. By steadying itself in their past, the compilers of the hymnal decided that much of traditional and contemporary American Lutheran piety had no place. During a renaissance of contemporary praise music and liturgical experimentation, the editors sent a clear message to those in the low church/charismatic renewal/Jesus movement: you are not welcome. The voice and religious expressions of a large part of a generation were purposefully excluded and therefore deemed un-Lutheran by their own church. Certainly, the *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (or “cranberry book”) attempted to reverse some of the damage by including a more diverse selection (including Taizé, contemporary songs, and a more global contribution), but the damage had already been done, as can be painfully seen in the church’s current aging demographic. The *LBW* can therefore be seen as a book-end to its continued public rejection of renewal efforts by lay and ministry alike.

Certainly, the renewal continued (and continues) among individuals and small groups, but any chance of inclusion and/or church-wide influence has long been abandoned. This is so much the case that Lutheran Renewal, initially created specifically to ignite Lutheranism and its structures in the charismatic, recently declared that they have given up on trying to renew the Lutheran Church in its offshoot.²⁷ In a 2004 bulletin, when talking about his early days in the renewal movement, Paul Anderson wrote on two major misconceptions. The first, that renewal is easy. The second, that the institution is capable of renewal. “We’ve seen no evidence of this, nor have any denominational renewal groups, here or abroad.” He continued:

Many attempts have been made, especially in the 80s, to do just that, through meetings between renewal and church leaders, through invitations to church leaders to participate in conferences, through an attempt to do seminary training under the church umbrella, through resolutions on the convention floor, but none of these methods worked.²⁸

CONCLUSION

The story of the charismatic renewal and the Lutheran Church is a personal one. I come from strong Lutheran heritage: my grandfather is a pastor, my

²⁷ Rev. David Housholder, personal conversation with the author, October 18, 2017.

²⁸ Paul Anderson, “A New Day at Lutheran Renewal,” *Lutheran Renewal*, September 2004, <https://tinyurl.com/y8b8muua>.

grandmother was his musical director, my uncle is a pastor, my father is a pastor, we have three missionary families, and three generations of seminary doctorates. The charismatic renewal of the late 1960s blew through the family like a whirlwind. But this did not come without complications.

Before this was even to be, my grandmother (a charismatic who converted to her husband's church at marriage) confronted my grandfather about his rejection of the renewal. "How am I supposed to listen to your judgment and that of your church when you can't even follow the Holy Spirit?" The entire family eventually followed her lead, but the painful reality was that the church in which generations of my family have dedicated their lives refused to validate their religious convictions. And just like the Lutheran Church at large, as time passed some family members chose to stay, many chose to leave, and I am the only grandchild of eight who is a Lutheran at all.

When the charismatic renewal blew through the mainline church, all that probably seemed to make sense was to circle the wagons and retool in order go back to the church's roots. Unfortunately, this reaction delivered somewhat of a deadly blow to the future of the church.

How Lutherans reacted to dramatic change was natural, especially within such a drastically short period of time. Within one decade, the country was back at war, youth were rebelling in a myriad of different ways, and the influence of all Protestant churches was dwindling at a radical pace. To go from one of your leaders being named "Mr. Protestant" on the cover of *Time* magazine to seemingly losing control of everything is a lot to ask of any religious institution, especially within a ten-year period of time. When the charismatic renewal blew through the mainline church, all that probably seemed to make sense was to circle the wagons and retool in order go back to the church's roots. Unfortunately, this reaction delivered somewhat of a deadly blow to the future of the church. Of course, there was no way for anyone to realize what a worldwide phenomenon Pentecostalism and charismatic Christianity would become, but by wholly denying this renewal any influence among the denomination at large, leadership not only rejected a future global phenomenon but also told a generation's piety movement that they had no place in their own church. This, of course, is not the only reason for the current status of Lutheranism as such a drastically aging church, but it is certainly a factor and must be admitted as such. The questions to ask then are: Are we too late? Would we listen to the Spirit now? Have we changed, or would we do the same thing again? ⊕

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