

# **The Rise and Fall of Martin Stephan**

By: Daniel Frey

The Lutheran religion did not get off to a fast start in America. None of the early explorers were Lutheran. Most of them were Roman Catholic or Anglican. None of the early settlers were Lutheran. In fact, Lutheranism did not come to America until Gustavus Adolphus, king of Sweden mentioned a planting of a Lutheran colony in 1624, about 125 years after the new land was discovered. His daughter Christina fulfilled this dream by sending over a colony of Lutheran Swedes to settle in Delaware in 1639. While this colony did not last, Lutherans by name have been in the country ever since.

Yet these so-called Lutherans were not always Lutheran. Calvinism, Pietism and Rationalism all had a devastating effect on these people. Pastors were uneducated. They fell into trying to reform the rough life of the new land. They would preach both in Reformed and Lutheran pulpits. Even Muhlenburg, the father of Lutheranism in America, was not necessarily always a confessional pastor. This does not mean that there were not any confessional pastors in America. Men, like John Campanius, the Falckners, the Henkels and others stood firmly in their beliefs. On a whole, however, Lutheranism in America suffered.

Then in the early 1800s more and more confessional Lutherans began to come over to this country to escape Rationalism, especially from Germany. Most notably was a Saxon pastor, named Martin Stephan, who brought over a group of immigrants to St. Louis. This group would start what was the most confessional synod in America at that time, the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. This synod established confessional Lutheranism in America. Yet when the synod started, they were without their leader.

Only a few months after Stephan led this confessional group to America, he was <sup>deposed</sup> ~~disposed~~ and cast out of the colony for sinful actions. How could this happen? How could a

confessional Lutheran pastor, who held so firmly to God's Word, fall into such evil sins? How could he be disposed so quickly by a people, who loved him and had just followed him to the new colony? Were they jealous of him? Were they looking for power? Or was Stephan deserving of this expulsion? These are the questions that this paper will examine as it examines the rise and fall of Martin Stephan.

Martin Stephan was born on August 13<sup>th</sup> 1777 in Stramberg Moravia, which is now in Czech Republic. His parents were originally Roman Catholic but had been converted to Protestantism before Martin was born. They raised Martin with a strict training in God's Word and were teaching him the family trade, as a linen weaver. However Martin's parents died when Stephan was still young. His pastor, Johann Ephraim Scheibel saw promise in Martin to be a pastor. So he gave him free access to the church's library. This reading encouraged Martin to become a pastor and gave him his conservative standpoint, which he held throughout his life.<sup>1</sup> With the financial help of some pietists, he was able to go to St. Elizabeth's Gymnasium in Breslau before attending both the University of Halle and the University of Leipzig.

Stephan, however, did not graduate from either of these universities. Although he was gifted in many ways, Stephan seemed to have little interest in reading the classics, which were required for graduation from a university. Instead he spent much of the time reading the Pietist's publications.<sup>2</sup> He seemed only to be interested in religious affairs. Upon leaving Leipzig, he served as a pastorate in Bohemia for a year. Then in 1810, something happened to Stephan that would change his life forever. He was called to be a pastor at the unique congregation of St. John's in Dresden.

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<sup>1</sup> Forster, Walter Zion on the Mississippi. Concordia Publishing House. St. Louis MO 1953. p. 27

<sup>2</sup> Ibid p. 28

St. John's was formed by Bohemian refugees during the Thirty Years' War. After the war ended, they were granted special rights by the government, even though they were considered part of the state church, because of their nationality. They could have irregular gatherings, which the state church normally prohibited, choose their own elders and pastors, and exercise their own church discipline. All of these privileges are important to understand when examining the rise of Martin Stephan.

Even though Stephan was not qualified to be called as a pastor in the state church because he had not graduated from a university, St. John's could exercise its freedom and call the Bohemian to be their pastor. They did this at the recommendation of Court Preacher Doring. At first, Stephan did not stir up much interest. However, soon, Stephan's fame would spread throughout all of Saxony.

Forster reports that in the first ten years that Stephan was there, membership increased six fold. At the end of 1819, St. John's had over a thousand members.<sup>3</sup> There are a couple of reasons for this increase. First, Stephan's conservative approach to Scripture was in stark contrast to the rationalistic state church of Saxony. Therefore people came to see this man, who was preaching something different, and the Holy Spirit was at work through his preaching. Secondly, Stephan had a strong personality and great communication skills. This, humanly speaking, drew people to Stephan and to his church and soon he had many strong supporters.

Thus the fame and power of Stephan spread throughout all of Saxony. "More and more people looked to him for spiritual leadership. When people in trouble came to him for aid and found it, they went away not only, perhaps not even primarily, as converts to

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<sup>3</sup> Forster p. 33

orthodoxy, but as personal champions of Stephan.”<sup>4</sup> These champions would then in turn tell others about Stephan and soon people would come from all over Germany, from all walks of life to meet this man. He was famous.

One of the men who sought comfort from Stephan was the great Missouri Synod theologian, CFW Walther. When Walther was at the University of Leipzig, he was in close association with a group of pietists, looking for some comfort. This group could not give Walther the comfort he needed. Instead “he was afflicted with serious doubt and suffered the most excruciating pains of spiritual diseases.”<sup>5</sup> One of his friends suggested that he write Stephan since Stephan had the reputation of bringing comfort to people, who could find it nowhere else. Walther took this advice and it changed his life.

When Stephan wrote a letter back to Walther, Walther was so scared that he fervently prayed to God that this letter would not be filled with the false comfort of the pietists.<sup>6</sup> Fortunately it was not. Instead of pointing him to his own good works, Stephan pointed Walther to the atoning and universal work of Christ. He set him free from the burden of the law. Through this letter and many others that were exchanged between these two men, Walther became a convinced Lutheran and an admired follower of Stephan because Stephan had explained the gospel to him.

That is just one example of the ability of Stephan to bring comfort to those who were distressed with God’s Word. There are countless other ones, such as Keyl, Burger, Brohm and Furbringer, whom Stephan comforted with the sweet hope of the gospel. In fact all these men would accompany Stephan when he immigrated to America. These were all professional men and it seems as if Stephan’s greatest influence was among

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<sup>4</sup> Forster p. 61

<sup>5</sup> Spitz, Lewis. The Life of CFW Walther. Concordia Publishing House. St. Louis MO. 1961. p. 17

<sup>6</sup> Ibid p. 21

these educated people.<sup>7</sup> He could appeal to these men on an intellectual level and bring comfort to those who could see that Pietism and Rationalism only offered a false hope.

Yet with all this fame and power, came numerous problems for Stephan. His Bohemian congregation was not completely happy with him. With all the new members that were coming in, they were feeling left out. They did not always welcome the new people that were from a different heritage than they. They liked their little Bohemian congregation with their special privileges and Stephan seemed to be ruining it. They did not think that he was fulfilling his pastoral duties to those who were actually his members.<sup>8</sup> He was spending too much time counseling other people.

This led fellow pastors in the area to not be pleased with Stephan as well. It seems as if Stephan had no regard for the so-called “sheep stealing” meaning taking members from other local congregations without their permission. With his growing popularity, it is easy to see that many people in the area would attend Stephan’s church so much that Stephan had to hold six services every Sunday in both Bohemian (Czech) and German.<sup>9</sup>

The greatest opposition to Stephan came from his superiors in both the state church and the government. Stephan did not teach the rationalistic beliefs that his superiors in the state church taught. Instead he held firmly to the truths confessed in the Lutheran confessions. The state church, however, could not ~~dispose~~<sup>depose</sup> Stephan because of the right, granted to the Bohemian congregation of St. John’s, that they could choose their own pastor. Instead of removing him, they attacked him in the press.

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<sup>7</sup> Forster p. 59

<sup>8</sup> Ibid p. 32

<sup>9</sup> Ibid p. 33

They attacked Stephan constantly, accusing him of running a sect. They said he was a separatist, who was causing criminal acts by his false, extreme teachings. They made these charges for many years and for the most part Stephan remained silent, letting his followers defend him. A few times, especially before 1823, he responded.

On one occasion in 1821, Stephan decided to defend himself. Writing back to those accusing him, he said, "I am not a member of any sect, old or new;...I am an evangelical Lutheran preacher and I preach the Word of God as recorded in the Bible...I preach the apostolic religion, which Luther preached in its purity with such courage."<sup>10</sup> This quote clearly shows how confessional and how firmly grounded in God's Word Stephan was. He had no intention of compromising his beliefs.

Yet his accusers continued their attacks. Some would say that they had good reason to do so, not on the basis of what he taught, but on the basis of his actions. Stephan was known for his irregular meetings, especially late at night. These types of meetings were outlawed in Saxony for all people, even for churches, because they feared social riots. However, Stephan was allowed to do them because of the special rights given to his unique congregation. This made the legal authorities suspicious of Stephan.

Stephan claimed that these meetings were open forums, a question and answer session dealing with such things as the Formula of Concord.<sup>11</sup> He claimed that he was doing nothing wrong at these meetings. Not everyone believed him. Many people thought that evil sins were being committed during these meetings. These suspicions rose higher and higher throughout the 1830s. No longer was Stephan just meeting with members of his church but he also began going on long walks, late at night with females.

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<sup>10</sup> This is a letter to the paper that is quoted in Forster p. 35

<sup>11</sup> Forster p. 69

After 1830, Stephan was extremely secret about what was going on. Often these walks or meetings would be very late at night, going until two or three in the morning and would involve married or unmarried women. Stephan claimed that he needed these long walks to fall asleep and the women were free to come as they chose.<sup>12</sup> Coupled with the fact that Stephan and his wife did not have the best marriage and he seemed to give little attention to his eight children, rumors about these meetings arose.

Some thought that Stephan was sexually immoral at these meetings. In fact accusations of sexual misconduct started to arise against Stephan. No matter how hard they tried, the authorities could not prove anything. They had a lot of wild accusations against him but they could not find substantial proof. Newspapers ran stories and cartoons depicting Stephan as a man, who was acting immorally. People began to develop strong feelings about Stephan one way or another. Because of this, the authorities tried to *dispose* dispose him from office. They feared that some sort of a riot would happen.

These accusations culminated in November of 1837. The authorities planned a raid on Stephan's private lodge, where many of these late night meetings took place to try and catch him in the act. When the police raided the lodge at midnight, they did not find Stephan there. Instead they found only five of Stephan's companions in a deep conversation. Stephan himself was on a walk with a female companion. When he returned, both he and his companion were questioned for a long time but they would admit to doing nothing wrong.

On the very next day, however, the state was able to gather enough accusations and enough support to suspend Stephan from office. Previously Stephan had been arrested but had always been cleared of accusations. This time, however, was different.

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<sup>12</sup> Forster p. 73



This suspension caught both Stephan and his close followers by surprised. They were not prepared for it. They thought that Stephan's popularity connected with his unique position at the Bohemian congregation would save him from suspension. They were wrong. Because of this suspension, Stephan hastened his plans of coming to America.

Already in 1830, Stephan had thrown around the idea of coming to America with some of his closest friends. He had good reason to do so. The state of religious affairs was not very good. There were very few confessional pastors in Saxony. When Stephan tried to unite these pastors around 1830 nothing happened. Plus the Prussian Union was influencing all those around him. He thought that soon he would be either under their control or under something similar. This led Stephan to say, "Will it not soon come to this that we must leave Babylon and Egypt and emigrate? Where will we turn? In the German states we can find no refuge. Everywhere there is great hatred for the pure Lutheran doctrine...So my eyes are being directed to North America."<sup>13</sup>

These plans for emigration really picked up speed after 1836, when more and more accusations were brought against Stephan. Yet this was not the main reason that Stephan gave for his plans. Stephan always blamed the false religions of his day, which were persecuting him. He claimed that these enemies were the ones, who were bringing up these false accusations of sexual misconduct so that they could prevent people from flocking to Stephan. There probably was some truth to this. Stephan was being persecuted by his enemies for his sound beliefs. He would never back down from his firm stance on Holy Scripture. By blaming his enemies instead of the accusations, Stephan managed to turn the attention from his actions to his strong confessional stance.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Stephan to Kurtz in March of 1833. Quoted by Forster p. 87

<sup>14</sup> Forster p. 107-112

Therefore many people followed Stephan to America. At this time, Stephan was well known throughout the community. He was famous. Everyone had an opinion on him, either good or bad. All knew of the accusations and his plans to sail to America. Stephan could say, "When my emigration became known, a company of 700 men people willingly joined me, even though I had asked no one."<sup>15</sup> This is probably embellished a little by Stephan because it is known that he did ask those close to him in his church to join him. It is true, however, that Stephan forced no one to join him on his emigration.

Why then would approximately 700 people<sup>16</sup> join a man, who was being accused of such evil actions, to sail across the ocean and start a new colony in America? They had complete trust in him. They believed that he was innocent. Stephan had never been convicted of anything in his life and he claimed he was innocent. Those who were close to him, believed that Stephan was such a good man that he would admit it if he did anything wrong.<sup>17</sup> They wholeheartedly believed that they were immigrating to America for religious reason, not to get away from being convicted of a crime. They believed Stephan when he said, "No hope remains for maintaining the Lutheran Church in our land."<sup>18</sup> It did not even cross their minds that Stephan may be deceiving them; for remember Stephan had that personality and those communication skills that made people fall in love with him and wholly <sup>devote</sup>devout themselves to him.

It is clear that this is the way that those who went with him to America thought of him. They had no problem subjecting themselves to any of his demands, whether they agreed with them or not. One demand was that Stephan required all people to be

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<sup>15</sup> Stephan to Flugal Oct 12<sup>th</sup> 1841 CHI MSS

<sup>16</sup> Forster puts the number at 665. Forster p. 187

<sup>17</sup> A quote from Keyl quoted by Forster p. 70

<sup>18</sup> Protocol of the emigration May 18<sup>th</sup> 1838. Quoted by Forester p. 137

confessional. He required that they subject themselves to God's Word and to the Augsburg Confession.<sup>19</sup> He wanted everyone in his colony to have the same the beliefs. This is good. He also demanded that everyone pay 100 thalers as a fee for the journey to the new colony, no matter what their income. Although most of the notable people were professional, a good number of farmers came over on the trip as well, who would not be as rich. Of course, it was necessary that there be some sort of a fee to pay for the journey across the ocean but it hardly seems fair to charge everyone the same price. Plus, although he denied it,<sup>20</sup> Stephan had access to the money and Forster claims that Stephan used this to his advantage buying stuff to make his journey a little more comfortable,<sup>21</sup> both before and during the trip. Later on when he would be expelled from the colony, the colonists charged Stephan with falsely taking their property. But for now they trusted him and paid the money without question.

Finally in October of 1838, all the preparations had been made and Stephan and his group were ready to set sail for St. Louis in America. Stephan chose St. Louis over other Midwest cities because it was safer. The Native Americans were not as hostile there as they were in Wisconsin or the Dakotas. Plus St. Louis was a developing town and they could buy land for the colony at a good price.

From November 3<sup>rd</sup> to November 18<sup>th</sup>, five ships set sail at different times to America carrying Stephan and his followers. Stephan was the unquestionable leader of this group. He was the one who came up with the idea of moving to America, promoted it and organized it. He decided who would go on what ship and who would be in charge

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<sup>19</sup> Forster states this on both p. 90 and p. 151

<sup>20</sup> Stephan to Flugel 1841. Stephan says, "I had nothing to do with this cash. I did not know, even today, the cash flow or their gifts."

<sup>21</sup> Forster p. 167

of each ship. Of course, all the important people sailed with Stephan on the *Olbers*. Stephan probably put all these important people on his ship so that he could keep an eye on them just in case they would try and usurp control.

This seemed to have happened. Stephan became very domineering on the ship. His companions noticed that his attitude had changed once he had boarded the ship. No longer were all wholly devoted to him but some leaders were questioning his authority, most notably Marbach and Dr. Vehse, two lay leaders.<sup>22</sup> This led Stephan to become more strict, hoping to squash these subtle attacks. On the ship, he was successful. Stephan was able to convince both Marbach and Dr. Vehse that these actions of theirs were sinful because he had been appointed the leader of this colony.

A few days later, after squashing these attacks, Stephan's leadership was made official. On January 14<sup>th</sup>, a day after the first colonists reached St. Louis, as the *Olbers* was in the Gulf of Mexico, the men on Stephan's ship elected him bishop of the colony, in charge of both the civil and religious affairs. The four prominent pastors, OH Walther, GH Lober, EGW Keyl and CFW Walther, signed a document which asked Stephan to accept this position of bishop. The document said,

Your reverence has, according to the gracious council of God, remained standing as the last, unshakable pillar on the ruins of the now devastated Lutheran Church in Germany...accordingly you have already for a long time occupied the position of a bishop and performed Episcopal functions among us...we have been instructed by you in many things in accordance with the Word of God...In consequence of all this, therefore we approach you with the reverent urgent plea: Accept Reverend Father the office of bishop among us bestowed on you by God and grant that we may now express our unqualified confidence in your fatherly love and pastoral faithfulness towards us.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Forster p. 282

<sup>23</sup> Stephan's Investiture January 14<sup>th</sup> 1839 CHI

It is amazing to see the power that Stephan still had over these men. Even though these men were now sensing that something could be wrong, he was still elected bishop and given complete control over all things in the new colony. In fact, a month later, as they were on the steamboat close to St. Louis, these men confirmed Stephan as bishop. They pledged their complete loyalty to him on February 16<sup>th</sup><sup>24</sup> saying,

We affirm and testify before the countenance of the omniscient God, in agreement with the truth, that we have complete and firm confidence in the wisdom and fatherly love of our Reverend Bishop; and we abhor all distrustful, suspicious statements and thoughts, in which he is accused of injustice, harshness, selfishness, carelessness in the administration of our temporal goods...Further we pledge ourselves to submit with Christian willingness and sincerity to the decrees and measures of His Reverence in respect to both ecclesiastical and community affairs.<sup>25</sup>

News about these documents spread rapidly to St. Louis, where the other members of Stephan's party had already gathered. In fact this news spread to all who were living in St. Louis so that many people were waiting for Stephan when his steamboat arrived on the shores of the Mississippi. However they were disappointed.

When the ship arrived in the middle of February, Stephan stayed in his luxury cabin, complaining of a sickness rather than going out. Finally in the middle of the night, he made his way into the city, where a room was prepared for him. Stephan would spend most of his time in St. Louis in this room, distant from all his fellow colonists. He would not let anyone come in a visit him without an appointment, except for those who were really close to him and came out mostly to maintain control.<sup>26</sup> Truly Stephan's attitude had changed from the man, who would counsel and talk with all who came to him in Dresden. He had become a different man. His fellow colonists would see this soon.

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<sup>24</sup> This is only three months before they would expel him from the colony.

<sup>25</sup> Pledge of Subjection to Stephan Feb 16<sup>th</sup> 1839 CHI

<sup>26</sup> Forster p. 325 and p. 353

No one knows for sure what had caused this change in Stephan. He was no longer the man with the engaging personality, standing up for the true Word of God, counseling all who came to him. Instead he had become distant. Maybe the years of accusations had finally taken <sup>their</sup> its toil on him. Maybe his ego had been built up by the constant years of praise that he thought of himself so highly. Maybe he was covering up some sins and his conscience was burdening him. Or maybe it was a combination of a couple of these. No one may ever know what caused this change in Stephan. It quickly became apparent in the new land.

On March 3<sup>rd</sup>, the first service of this new colony was held at Christ's Church<sup>27</sup> in St. Louis. Stephan, of course, was the preacher. There were a large number of people in attendance at this first service, waiting anxiously to hear Stephan. All, who had made the trip over to America, came. Plus many people from the city of St. Louis attended because the newspapers were constantly running stories, updating people on the actions of this famous Bohemian migrating to America. At this service, however, Stephan did not impress anyone. Apparently Stephan, who was preaching in a church for the first time in about a year because of the suspension and the long boat ride over, did not give an engaging sermon. Two days later, the newspaper stories of this service were kind to these new colonists, calling them intelligent and dignified but they made no mention of Stephan.<sup>28</sup> Most of his own people, who had followed Stephan to America, were disappointed in his efforts. Stephan, of course, blamed the people for their lack of faith and their doubting. It was not his fault that the people were not impressed with his

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<sup>27</sup> Christ's Church was an Episcopal Church, which served as the colonist's church for the first three and a half years they were in the new land, until they could afford to build a place of their own. The colonists would worship either on Sat afternoon or most of the time on Sunday afternoons.

<sup>28</sup> *Daily Evening Gazette* ran an article on March 5<sup>th</sup> two days after this sermon expressing this. This article is found in Forster p. 322-323

sermon but theirs. While Stephan had never been the most engaging preacher, his sermons were now lacking substance. From now on Stephan rarely preached.<sup>29</sup>

Part of the reason was that Stephan was bishop over both ecclesiastical and civil affairs. He had control over all things in the colony and this took up a lot of his time, especially in the beginning. Stephan had very specific ways, in which he wanted his colony run. It took him a month to enforce these demands.<sup>30</sup> Plus the colonists had purchased land in Perry County, about one hundred miles south of St. Louis, where they would establish their colony. Before they could move down there, many preparations had to be made. Stephan oversaw most of these preparations.

During this time, from February to April, Stephan was ruling with an iron fist. This once again caused his close followers to question his authority, especially Marbach.<sup>31</sup> Marbach wanted a separation of a church and state. He thought that Stephan had too much power and later on this turned out to be true. Whenever these small uprisings would arise against Stephan, he was able to put them down. As long as he was on the scene, the majority of the people would back their bishop.<sup>32</sup> By May of 1839, Stephan thought that he had established enough control over his colonists that he could leave them in St. Louis and make preparations in their new land of Perry County. He went to Perry County with about 200 men, leaving 400 still in St. Louis.

Therefore Stephan was in Perry County on May 5<sup>th</sup>, trying to get things ready so that the colonists could move down there, when Pastor Lober preached a sermon to the colonists in St. Louis that would change Stephan's life forever. Lober's sermon was on

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<sup>29</sup> Forster p. 323 Forster references a couple of first hand accounts in support of these statements. He references Winter to Guericke on April 28<sup>th</sup> 1841 and Hohne to his brother on Sept 26<sup>th</sup> 1840.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid p. 355

<sup>31</sup> Stephan to Flugal 1841

<sup>32</sup> Forster p. 390

the 6<sup>th</sup> Commandment. In it, he must have had some piercing law that had an effect on a couple of women in the congregation. Two women, independently of each other, without each other's knowledge, came to Lober that afternoon and confessed that Stephan had seduced him. This shocked Lober and he quickly told CFW Walther. Within a few days, all the prominent clergy had been informed of this heinous crime.

This accusation was the straw that broke the camel's back. These men, who had been shown the great comfort of the gospel by Stephan, who had defended him against all the accusations in Dresden, who had willingly followed him to a new colony in North America, who had a deep love and admiration for their leader, finally realized that Stephan had been living in open sin. They finally had the proof to make charges against Stephan and take away his power as bishop.

It is amazing the change that took place in these men. Only a year earlier, they had defended their beloved bishop against numerous attacks in Dresden, asserting that Stephan had to be innocent because if he was guilty, he would have confessed.<sup>33</sup> Only three months earlier they had elected him bishop over ecclesiastical and civil affairs and affirmed their subjection to him. Now they were making plans to ~~dispose~~<sup>depose</sup> him from office. The clergy thought even if he was innocent of these charges, he should resign for the good of the colony.<sup>34</sup> Truly these men had seen a change in Stephan.

The clergy set into a motion a plan that would ~~dispose~~<sup>depose</sup> Stephan from his office of bishop. They concluded since they called him to that position on the boat, surely they had the power to remove him from office. Therefore they leaked out the information to the people. When they did, a few other women came forward with similar accusations of

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<sup>33</sup> Keyl said this quoted by Forster p. 70 (see footnote 17)

<sup>34</sup> Forster p. 394-395



sexual misconduct.<sup>35</sup> The clergy even decided to send Walther<sup>36</sup> to Perry County to inform the people, who <sup>were</sup> working on this new place with Stephan, of the accusations.<sup>37</sup>

Since Walther had <sup>come</sup> gone here without Stephan's authority, he was not welcomed by Stephan. The people, however, readily accepted him and believed the accusations. They quickly turned against their leader. This shows that they too had seen a change in Stephan and were feeling oppressed by his new domineering personality. They even went into the woods to hear Walther preach on Pentecost instead of listening to Stephan's sermon.<sup>38</sup> The people had been turned against their bishop. Stephan's fate was sealed.

Stephan said that he had no clue about these new accusations or about his impending removal from office until May 29<sup>th</sup> when he was finally accused to his face.<sup>39</sup> This is hard to believe. The majority of the people were no longer listening to Stephan, or coming to him. Plus the rumors were spreading wildly among the colonists and among the newspapers in St. Louis. It is true that neither Walther nor any of the other clergy, who were planning <sup>to depose him</sup> his disposal, spoke with him about the accusations specifically. However Stephan had to know that something was going on.

Finally on May 29<sup>th</sup>, all the preparations had been made in St. Louis and the colonists were ready to <sup>depose</sup> dispose of their bishop. All, who were left in St. Louis, came down on two different steamboats to Perry County. When they arrived Pastor Keyl and Pastor Lober formally charged Stephan with his crimes and placed him under house arrest for the evening. Stephan, of course, claimed he was innocent.

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<sup>35</sup> Forster p. 395-398

<sup>36</sup> This was really the first time that Walther is seen as a leader of the colonists. By stepping up during this controversy, Walther was now perceived by the people as the leader.

<sup>37</sup> Forster p. 403-405

<sup>38</sup> Ibid 409

<sup>39</sup> Stephan to Flugal 1841

On the next day, Stephan was brought before the Council, which consisted of the prominent clergy and a few prominent lay members. They did not let him defend himself and quickly found him guilty of adultery and misuse of their property and false doctrine. This led them to excommunicate him. Stephan pleaded that the Council was not legitimate since, as the leader of the colony, he did not appoint it. His plea was in vain. The Council had already drawn up a disposition which said,

Martin Stephan has been accused before the subscribed Council of sins of fornication and adultery, committed repeatedly, and of prodigal maladministration of the property of others and has been guilty of false doctrine... We thereby declare by virtue of our office that you have forfeited not only your spiritual office but also the rights and privileges as a member of the Christian Church, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.<sup>40</sup>

After this was read to Stephan, he made one last attempt to remain leader of the colony. He refused to leave his house in Perry County. This led to an ugly scene between Stephan and his accusers, Dr. Vehse and Marbach. They marched into Stephan's house and in Stephan's own words, "acted like ones possessed by the devil, like crazy men."<sup>41</sup> They searched through his entire house and all his things, even the clothes that he was wearing and took all his money. Stephan goes into great detail about this and says that they "treated him as one treats a treasonable and extremely horrible state criminal."<sup>42</sup> While he did not see himself as a criminal, his enemies definitely did.

Finally they forcefully removed him from his house. They wanted to immediately send him across the Mississippi River to Illinois as punishment. However there were many logs being floated down the river at this time, which

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<sup>40</sup> Sentence of Disposition Pronounced Upon Stephan. May 30<sup>th</sup> 1839 CHI Also quoted by Forster p. 418

<sup>41</sup> Stephan to Flugal 1841

<sup>42</sup> Ibid

made it impossible to cross. Therefore they put him up in tent for the night, not allowing him the comfort of his own home. Stephan recounting this miserable night says, “I was very thirsty and begged only for a glass of water but no one gave me anything nor did anyone care about my health.”<sup>43</sup>

On the next day, May 31<sup>st</sup>, before they sent him across the Mississippi, they forced Stephan to sign a document, in which he gave up his rights as bishop. The document says, “I, Martin Stephan...do certify by the discussions that took place on this day...to voluntarily cede and give up control of the above mentioned congregation to her trustees.”<sup>44</sup> Then Stephan promises never again to come back to the colony. The document says, “I promise never to come back to the territory of the said company and to the state of Missouri.”<sup>45</sup>

Even though Stephan signed this document, it did not mean that he confessed to any of the accusations. In fact, he maintained his innocence until the day he died. When he boarded the ferry, which would take him across the River to Illinois, he was still protesting his expulsion but to no avail. When he left, they gave him “the necessary clothing, a cloak, linen, 2 beds, 2 chairs, 1 clock, 1 sofa cushion and its frame, books of meditation and 100 dollars in money.”<sup>46</sup> Plus they gave him an axe and a spade so that he could do work.<sup>47</sup> At 10:30 am on May 31<sup>st</sup>, two days after they formally accused him, Stephan left the colony.

This may seem quick to some people. It may seem like they were treating Stephan worse than he deserved. Imagine how these people must have felt. They

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<sup>43</sup> Stephan to Flugal 1841

<sup>44</sup> Stephan's Renunciation of the Claims on the *Gesellschaft* CHI MSS Also in Forester p. 421

<sup>45</sup> Ibid

<sup>46</sup> Ibid

<sup>47</sup> Stephan to Flugal 1841

loved their bishop. They would do anything for him. They defended him against all attacks in Dresden and followed him to America. This man had brought the Word of God to them and had pulled many of them out of the depths of Pietism and Rationalism. So they trusted him wholeheartedly. Now they were convinced that this man was lying to them. They were convinced that he had deceived them and used their trust to his advantage. This hurt these men and angered them more than a common criminal would have. Because of this anger, they acted quickly and did not let him defend himself. They were broken men.

It is also important to note that Stephan never admitted to doing anything wrong. Yet the constant attacks on him during the latter years of his life, coupled with multiple women accusing him of adultery apart from each other were enough to convince the colonists and most people. After the Saxons had <sup>deposed</sup> disposed of Stephan, his maid, Louise Guenther, confessed to having an affair with Stephan.<sup>48</sup> Before they could punish her, however, she fled the colony to live with Stephan and lived with him until he died.

Stephan, meanwhile, struggled with his new life in Illinois. He quickly found a house with an American farmer and lived there. He also somehow got 700 dollars. His enemies claimed he stole this when he left, possibly with the help of Louise Guenther but both have always denied these accusations.<sup>49</sup> The toughest thing for Stephan was the language barrier. He did not know a word of English and no one around him spoke any German.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Bekenntnis der Louise Guenther MS CHI

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. Plus Forster p. 423

<sup>50</sup> Stephan to Flugal 1841

Then Stephan got extremely sick. Probably the mental stress of being *deposed* disposed, coupled with living in a new land around new people, brought this sickness upon him. Stephan became so sick that he thought he might die. Pastor Lober went to visit him but it seemed like much of his visit was trying to get a deathbed confession out of Stephan instead of comforting him with the gospel. Stephan would not admit to anything, even when he thought he was going to die and the meeting proved to be worthless.<sup>51</sup> Till the day he died Stephan lived by these words, "I had done no evil. Instead I had only done much good."<sup>52</sup>

Stephan went on to live a relatively quiet life after this. By this time, his spirit had been broken. He writes, "After more than thirty years in the preaching office...I was robbed by those whom I gave hope and love. Their cruelty drove me to misery through their shameful attacks...This is the thanks, which the exiled Saxon congregation gave me for my great care."<sup>53</sup>

In October of 1845, he was called once again to be a pastor, at Trinity in Horse Prairie IL, where he served for about four months before he passed away. It is not known how much the people in Horse Prairie knew of his expulsion, although because of his fame, they probably had at least heard rumors of it. During these four months, Stephan served this congregation faithfully, preaching the Word of God to these people and showing them the wonderful comfort, which they could receive through the gospel.

Stephan died quietly on February 26<sup>th</sup> 1845. He is buried in Trinity Cemetery. A picket fence surrounds his grave and a ten foot cross serves as its

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<sup>51</sup> Forster p. 424

<sup>52</sup> Stephan to Flugal 1841

<sup>53</sup> Ibid

marker. According to tradition, his casket was carried around the church three times before he was buried, showing the respect they had for this man.<sup>54</sup>

Even though Martin Stephan had some troubles in his life, even though he more than likely committed some very grievous sins, which caused an expulsion from the colony, God used Stephan to achieve his purpose here on earth. The Saxon immigrants, whom he brought over, really set the standard for Lutheranism in America by practicing and confessing what confessional Lutheranism really is. For their firm foundation and solid beliefs they have, humanly speaking, Martin Stephan to thank. He was the one, who showed most of them, including the great theologian, CFW Walther, the gospel. He was the one who stood firm in God's Word and held onto all the Lutheran Confessions. He was the one who would not compromise his faith even though his enemies in Dresden constantly attacked it.

How then could a faithful man fall into such sins? The devil is good at what he does. He will constantly attack those who hold firmly to God's Word because he does not want it to be preached. He would like nothing better than to force one of God's servants into a sin and discredit the message he is preaching. He does this in different ways. With Stephan, this author thinks, the devil used power. The more power Stephan received, the bolder he became in his sin and the less he stood firmly in God's Word. Once he was expelled and his power as bishop was taken away, he went back to being a faithful man. Solely by God's grace, both the colony and Stephan persevered through this tragedy and were still able to establish confessional Lutheranism in this country. Praise be to God for bringing Stephan and the Saxon immigrants over to America.

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<sup>54</sup> Pastor Martin Stephan. MSS from Trinity Lutheran Church in Horse Prairie IL

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