

# Johann kilian and the wends: the foundation of lutheranism in texas

[Religion](#), [Christianity](#)



Through this course (LCMS History) and others, I have heard the story of German Lutherans who left Europe and settled near Saint Louis, Missouri, under the leadership of Martin Stephan and (soon thereafter) C. F. W. Walther. This story seems quite familiar to many of my seminary classmates who originate from the Midwest and nearby regions. As a nearly lifelong resident of Texas, I had never before heard much of that story. The Lutherans in my communities generally have a different history - one involving a people group known as the Wends.

These histories have merged at some point between their beginnings and the present; both communities are currently at home in the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod and share in fellowship and confession. Naturally several questions arise for further investigation. Who are the Wendish people? Who led them to America? Why did they come to America? What is their religious history? How did they integrate with the Missouri Synod? Why are they a valuable people group in our church body? Answering each of these essential questions necessitates a fairly broad scope, though certainly a coherent inspection.

To address the topics at hand, I will present first a brief overview of the European climate during the time that the Wends left Germany as well as an account of their migration. Second, I will offer a concise biography of Johann Kilian, the early leader of the Texan Wendish community. Third, I will describe historically significant moments of interaction between the Lutheran Wends and the LCMS (and its predecessors and associated church bodies)

and illustrate how these events contributed to the Wendish assimilation into the LCMS.

Each of these components serves the purpose of presenting the Wendish community as a significant component of American Lutheranism, and one with an enduring impact on the LCMS church body. The necessary information is gathered mostly through printed and published texts on the subject at hand. It is also shaped by personal memory of this topic through experiences with members of the Wendish community as well as its associated institutions. Content in support of my purpose is present in these following paragraphs. European Pressures and the Wendish Migration

In the early 19th century, the Wends were culturally and politically suppressed by their dominant political leaders. The land of the Wendish people, Lusatia, was intentionally divided between Saxon and Prussian rule. This virtually eliminated any possibility for national independence; the Wendish language became increasingly distinct between the nationalities (Caldwell1961). Also, they were economically dependent on German landholders and had little opportunity for social success. Those who sought better standards of living left their farmland for cities such as Bautzen and generally assimilated into the German culture in the process.

A very small group of the Wends was training for the clergy in Prague and in Leipzig; as these students encountered political theories and topics of higher education they developed into the intelligentsia of the Wendish community. These educated people served as the leadership that the Wends

needed to rise out of their lowly confinement (Grider 1982). Religious difficulties also characterized this time period. The Wends experienced great pressure to participate in Prussian Unionism, instituted by the Calvinist-leaning King of Prussia, Frederick William III (Nielsen 1989).

Since the time of the Reformation, the majority of the Wendish people had been Protestants. This switch to Lutheranism distinguished the Wends religiously from the mainly Catholic Czechs and Poles with whom they shared many cultural and linguistic similarities (Grider 1982). As a people they were very interested in maintaining a definite and self-defined identity, distinct from surrounding people groups. This mandate of Prussian Unionism was an affront to this endeavor. Many spoke against this offensive consolidation, including Johann Kilian who was at that time a young student of theology at the University of Leipzig.

In this context of religious pressure, a group of deeply conservative Wends began worshipping together in a private house-church. By 1845 they had established a small congregation with a building devoted as their worship space. After nine more years enduring religious antagonism, a core group of lay leaders drafted, in 1854, a constitution to govern the migration of the whole congregation to a new land with religious freedom. At this time, the congregation issued a call to Kilian, requesting that he shepherd them on their journey and minister to them in their future situation (Grider 1982).

Kilian, eager to employ his missionary education, accepted their call.

Additionally “ agricultural disasters” during the mid-1800s spurred the

Wends into discussions of leaving Germany/Prussia and seeking a new land for a new opportunity. Some impoverished German farmers, with whom the Wends were amiable, had already immigrated to America and Australia. Their joyous letters to the homeland were published by the German press and encouraged these hopeful Wendish immigrants. Of the Wends immigrating to Texas, the “ first trickle of Wendish adventurers” (Grider 1982) arrived around 1850.

A group of 35 set sail for America in 1853 but wrecked off the shore of Cuba. While stranded on the island, many learned how to roll cigars to supplement their income during their stranded time. Eventually compassionate German organizations in Havana, Cuba, and New Orleans funded and arranged for their transport to Galveston. One year after this small group’s arrival in Galveston, the “ highly educated and forceful” (Grider 1982) Pastor Johann Kilian led a boatload of 600 of his congregants, pious and devout Wendish Lutherans, from Germany to Galveston.

They made their voyage on the Ben Nevis, still considered within the Texan Wendish community as a counterpart of the English Pilgrims’ Mayflower (Grider 1982). Kilian was the only professional, educated man in the congregation; all the others were farmers and craftsmen. Yet the people possessed between them an adequate variety of skills to guarantee a self-sufficient colony. This group established the town of Serbin, which continues to be a place of cultural influence in central Texas. The Life of Johann Kilian The only son of Wendish farmers in Upper Lusatia, Johann Kilian was born on March 22, 1811.

Two years later his mother, Maria Kilian nee Mattig, and his infant sister died. His grandmother helped to care for him for the next three years at which time his father, Peter Kilian, remarried. Soon thereafter his grandmother died. In 1821, while Kilian was ten years old, his father also died. Following the death of his parents, he inherited enough money to fund his education at the gymnasium (high school) in the chief Wendish city of Beutzen (Caldwell 1961). Johann found himself under the care of his uncle who leased the child's inherited property and used the income to support the boy's schooling.

One can only imagine what sort of psychological impact these deaths must have had on young Kilian. According to Nielsen (2003), " nothing in his writings indicate any anxiety during these early years. " It is likely that during his youth with his extended family he began to learn about Christian living and developed a deep hope in the resurrection promise. Kilian spent more than four years at the Gymnasium in Beutzen. There he was educated in Hebrew, Greek, Latin, French, and German; Wendish was only used in private and in his earlier years in grade school.

Kilian and some of his classmates organized a Wendish club on campus to facilitate informal conversation in their mother tongue (Nielsen 2003). He was quite successful in Beutzen and soon enrolled at the University of Leipzig to study theology, where he once again encountered a Wendish circle. This organization propagated a rising attitude of Wendish nationalism, especially in contrast with German culture. Rather than associating with this divisive

group, Kilian joined a German club whose central goal was “ the preservation of pure Lutheran teaching” (Nielsen 2003).

This decision seems to have been more of a growing attraction toward orthodox Lutheranism than a rejection of Wendish culture. It also seems that in this association He was taking a stand in contrast to the majority of the faculty of Leipzig who were heavily influenced by rationalism at the time. In 1835, Kilian obtained his license to preach and was assigned to an assisting position at Hochkirch, a large parish which included several surrounding viliages. The following year, he travelled to Switzerland and attended a small mission school in Basel, remembering hischildhoodvow to become a foreign missionary.

Back in eastern Germany, his uncle (different from the one who had helped to raise him as a child) was the pastor of a Lutheran church in Kotitz; he died while Killian was away at school. Then in 1837 Kilian returned to Kotitz and received his full ordination. This enabled him to assume the senior pastorate there (Nielsen 2003). Most of the Wends in his congregation could not understand German, so Kilian undertook several translation projects for the benefit of his flock. He published a book containing twenty eight hymns in Wendish; some were translations of German hymns and a few were his original pieces.

These musical arrangements were very well received by both his own congregation and numerous other Lutheran Wendish assemblies. He continued to translate many German songs and eventually produced more

than one hundred of his own hymns (Nielsen 2003). These hymns emphasize the centrality of Jesus in Christian living and often contain declarations of profound hope. Several of his songs and poems are contained in a collection edited by David Zersen (2010). Included, here, is one verse from Kilian's hymn, "Blessed Land": Jesus leads his saints on earth: Witnesses are we! Sadness, trials, suffering? Faithful we will be!

Christ is our life. There's a kingdom waiting there; No more sorrow, no more care. Christ is our life. In addition to his musical translation efforts, Kilian translated the Lutheran Confessions into Wendish. He began with Luther's Small Catechism in the late 1840s and finished the remainder of the confessions in 1854. Other prominent Wendish intellectuals frequently frowned upon his efforts, insisting that importing German religious thinking would contaminate the Wendish culture. They preferred to advance hopeful nationalism for the Wends and showed little priority for proper doctrinal adherence.

Kilian disagreed with their attitude and continued "translating religious works into the mother tongue to enrich the language and simultaneously nourish religious life" (Nielsen 2003). These exercises in translation eventually led to a reasonable popularity for Kilian, especially among likeminded Wendish Lutherans. One such congregation of people at Weigersdorf was becoming increasingly troubled by the pressures of Prussian Unionism. In 1844 they issued a call to Kilian with hopes that he would agree to lead them in their migration away from their oppressive setting.



Kilian accepted the call on two conditions. He required that the congregation would pledge faithfulness to pure Lutheran doctrine and also that the congregation acquire an immigration permit from the appropriate Prussian authorities. (Nielsen 2003). Kilian over the next several years served this as well as other parishes (especially one in Klitten) which shared in the Lutheran confession. During that time, he married Maria Groschel, with whom he had four children while they remained in Europe - only one of which survived into maturity (Nielsen 2003).

Religious pressures continued to build until in 1854, a group of 600 Wendish Lutherans (under Kilian's shepherding) began the process of relocating to Texas. While Kilian is often credited with leadership of this venture, such wording is misleading at best. He did not object to the exodus from Europe, but the instigation of the process was from the laypeople. Kilian's role was to accompany them as their pastor (Nielsen 2003). The journey was characterized by illness, danger, and loss of life. Kilian was heavily relied upon for his pastoral care at several points on the journey.

In one instance while at sea, several people were suffering from sea-sickness below the deck. The captain of the Ben Nevis (the ship that carried them across the Atlantic) instructed that the migrants come up for fresh air to improve their health. Some did not cooperate with the captain's orders. Kilian gently persuaded those who remained below deck to come up. While this shows the authority the Wends saw in Kilian, it also caused resentment from some because he was exceeding his religious responsibilities.

The voyagers eventually crossed the Atlantic and arrived at the port of Galveston. They then travelled to central Texas and established the colony of Serbin. For the next three decades, Kilian served the Texan Wends as their pastor and endeavored to connect them with likeminded believers in their new land (Nielsen 2003). Eventually he was able to forge a confessional relationship with the Missouri Lutherans and connect his people to a larger church body. After Kilian's death on September 12, 1884, many tributes were written about him. These included a handful of lengthy pieces in *Der Luteraner*, the official periodical of the synod (Martens 2011). The Texan Road to Missouri " Religious isolation was not part of his tradition" (Nielsen 2003). In Texas, Kilian became a friend of Caspar Braun, a Lutheran who had already been in Texas for about five years. Braun had formed the Evangelical Lutheran Synod in Texas and served as its first president. While Kilian certainly enjoyed his friendship with Braun, he was hesitant to join this Texas Synod because he considered that it shared too many similarities with the Prussian Union which he had left.

He also lamented the lack of enriching liturgy in its churches (Nielsen 2003). Rather he became drawn to the German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States. Geography was certainly a hindrance to fellowship with this church body, he considered it far less of a barrier than theological incompatibility. In his effort to establish fellowship with the Missouri Synod, he wrote a letter introducing himself and the Wends to C. F. W. Walther, who was also born in 1811.

Though Kilian and Walther did attend the University of Leipzig simultaneously in 1832, there is no indication in any of their correspondence that they knew each other before they were in America. Kilian had learned of Walther chiefly through his writings. He owned a copy of Walther's *Stimme der Kirche in der Frage von Kirche und Amt*. Kilian agreed with Walther's position on church polity which "empowered the voters' assembly as the supreme authority and diminished the power of the ecclesiastical leaders" (Nielsen 2003). His congregation joined the Missouri Synod in 1866 with Kilian as the first Missouri Synod pastor in the state of Texas.

Under Kilian's pastoral leadership, the Wends became fervent supporters of synodical education and eventually began to issue calls to American-trained pastors. By 1877 nearly a dozen pastors were serving Missouri Synod congregations in Texas and the group gained recognition as the Texas Conference of the Western District. Only a couple years later, the Southern District was organized, ranging from El Paso, Texas, to San Augustine, Florida. Then in 1903, the Texas District of the LCMS was formed; it contained 23 congregations, nearly 40 pastors, and 11 school teachers.

**Concluding Remarks** The Texas District of the LCMS owes its genesis to the migration of the Wends and the pastoral leadership of Johann Kilian. It is now one of the largest districts in the LCMS and has produced more synodical presidents (Behnken, Harms, and Kieschnick) than any other district. The Wendish culture and religious experiences have shaped and continue to shape the theological thinking of Texas Lutherans. It is especially for these

reasons that the Wends are a valuable people group in the Lutheran Church  
- Missouri Synod.