

Background to the Augsburg Confession

Presented to the Western Wisconsin District in Convention

June 2, A.D., 2014

The theme to our district convention this year leads us on the road to Reformation. As the Lord wills it, we will celebrate the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation in joyful celebration in October of 2017. Ring the church bells! Fire the town cannon! Call all the members together to celebrate! From October 31, 1517, until today, the path of our Lord's Church has been advancing under the influence of the Reformation.

In this convention and the next three, we will trace the road to Reformation by looking at the great "solas." *Sola gratia, sola Scriptura, sola fide, solus Christus* – **by grace alone, from Scripture alone, through faith alone, Christ alone** – this is our heritage, this is our journey.

Each year the Lutheran Confessions will claim center stage to enlighten and guide the delegates. We are confessing members of Christ's Church and confessional members of the Lutheran Church because the Lutheran Confessions restored and restated the great truths of Scripture so that laymen and pastors alike could claim the faith, state the faith, defend and promote the faith as well as spot heresies against the faith and threats to the faith.

Nine Confessions make up the Lutheran Confessions, assembled in the Book of Concord of 1580. Three of them are known by memory; nine of them need to become the conversation of Lutheran leaders, laymen and pastors alike, as we continue the Confession of our Lord's Church.

The nine Lutheran Confessions are

- **The Apostles' Creed**
 - "The Creed of the Baptized"
 - A brief confession for Baptism, for education, for solidifying the basics of the Christian faith
 - Date uncertain, but very early
 - In a form generally referred to as the "Old Roman Symbol" [symbol = confessional statement], may be as early as the Second Century. A.D.
 - Here is the Old Roman Symbol in its Greek form, which is generally considered older than the Latin version:

Πιστεύω εἰς θεὸν πατέρα παντοκράτορα	I believe in God the Father Almighty
καὶ εἰς Χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν (τὸν) υἱὸν αὐτοῦ τὸν μονογενῆ,	and in Christ Jesus His Son, the only-begotten (unique / one-and-only)
τὸν κύριον ἡμῶν, τὸν γεννηθέντα ἐκ πνεύματος ἁγίου καὶ Μαρίας τῆς παρθένου,	our Lord who was conceived of the Holy Spirit and of Mary the Virgin
τὸν ἐπὶ Ποντίου Πιλάτου σταυρωθέντα	who was crucified under Pontius Pilate

καὶ ταφέντα,	and was buried
τῇ τρίτῃ ἡμέρᾳ ἀναστάντα ἐκ (τῶν) νεκρῶν,	on the third day He rose from the dead
ἀναβάντα εἰς τοὺς οὐρανοὺς,	He ascended into the heavens
καθήμενον ἐν δεξιᾷ τοῦ πατρὸς	He is seated at the right hand of the Father
ὅθεν ἔρχεται κρῖναι	from there He will come to judge
ζώντας καὶ νεκρούς,	the living and the dead
καὶ εἰς πνεῦμα ἅγιον,	and in the Holy Spirit
ἅγιαν ἐκκλησίαν,	the holy Church
ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν,	the forgiveness of sins
σαρκὸς ἀνάστασιν. ¹	the resurrection of flesh.

[What’s missing? Precious little. The missing phrases are “maker of heaven and earth” “suffered” (under Pontius Pilate), “died” “descended into hell” (which is also omitted in the Nicene Creed) and “the communion of saints” and “the life everlasting.” Any congregation could use the Old Roman Symbol for regular confession.]

- **The Nicene Creed**

- “The Creed of the Communicant”
- A more thorough treatment of the Person of Jesus (truly God and truly human, equal with the Father) and the Person and work of the Holy Spirit (equal with the Father and the Son)
- First proposed at the Council of Nicaea (325, A.D.) and finalized at the Council of Constantinople (381, A.D.)

- **The Athanasian Creed**

- The most thorough of the three ecumenical creeds
- An extensive confession of the unity of the three Persons of the Trinity and the distinction between the Persons
- An extensive confession of the Person and work of Jesus Christ
- Named after Athanasius, who had been active during the Council of Nicaea
- Date = uncertain. Sixth-Eighth century, A.D.

- **Luther’s Small Catechism (1529)**

- Memorized by children and adults since 1529, a treasury of the basics of the faith
- Still fulfilling its original purpose: to bring the faith to families in a simple form ready made for memorization
- A masterpiece of simplicity and depth in bringing the faith to each rising generation

¹ <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/harnack/creed.ii.iii.html> Christian Classics Ethereal Library, by Adolf Harnack. Translation from “The Apostles’ Creed,” *Herzog’s Realencyclopädie*. According to J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, Longman, 1972, this symbol is quoted by Tertullian and Irenaeus in the Second Century, A.D.

- **Luther's Large Catechism (1529)**
 - Written for pastors and church leaders to deepen their understanding of the basic matters of the faith

- **The Augsburg Confession (1530)**
 - Generally considered the centerpiece of all of Lutheran theology
 - Written as a peaceful, winsome overture to unite all believers, Lutheran and non-Lutheran
 - Declares the catholicity (universality) of the Lutheran confessors – in the mainstream of the ancient confessions of all who embrace Christ Jesus
 - Denies the heresies charged against the Lutheran confessors
 - Lists the abuses the confessors are correcting in the Roman Catholic Church
 - Written by Philip Melanchthon, endorsed by Luther, confessed by the Lutheran princes, John the Steadfast and other evangelical leaders and delegates

- **The Apology of the Augsburg Confession (1531)**
 - “Apology” = a formal defense of one’s position. An apology is *not* saying “we’re sorry;” it is a confession as to why we believe as we do
 - The Roman Catholic response to the Augsburg Confession (“The Confutation”) charged the confessors with many errors. The Apology refuted those charges and became a treasure of Lutheran theology
 - Written by Philip Melanchthon
 - Together with the Augsburg Confession, the Confessional writings every Lutheran should become familiar with

- **The Smalcald Articles (1536) and the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope (1537)**
 - While writing the Smalcald Articles Martin Luther became seriously ill and believed this would be his final testimony to the Church
 - The Smalcald Articles confess what cannot be compromised and why
 - Philip Melanchthon wrote the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope as a supplement to the Augsburg Confession

- **The Formula of Concord (1577)**
 - The last confessional writing of the 16th century was intended to bring concord to the various branches of the evangelical Lutheran movement
 - Does not make a new confession, but expands and confirms the teachings of the Augsburg Confession
 - Has two parts: the Epitome, or brief version intended for congregational study and the Solid Declaration (also known as the Thorough Declaration) or the unabridged version
 - Primary authors: Jacob Andreae, Martin Chemnitz, Nicholas Selnecker
 - Signed by 8,100 pastors and theologians and over 50 government leaders

The Introduction to the Augsburg Confession

Chancellor Beyer stood to speak on that warm Saturday afternoon on June 25, 1530, A.D. Princes filled the room, and not only princes, but the Emperor, Charles V, as well. They had different motives and varied reasons for being there.

As the Chancellor began, history changed. A single monk/confessor of 1517 had produced a confessing movement; that movement now became a church. Laymen, instructed by their theologians, took charge of the task of standing on Christian principle and upholding Christian faith in the face of overwhelming odds.

As Chancellor Beyer spoke, the windows were left open, and the crowd outside heard the words – for they were read in German, the language of the land, not the official Latin of the empire. The words he read were the first general confession produced for the Church since the time of the Athanasian Creed.

While Chancellor Beyer was the tip of the spear, many laymen and theologians stood behind his words. Extracting the history that led to June 25, 1530, is an exciting and informative quest. Our brothers and sisters in the faith faced opposition in the Roman Church and in various empires. Banned and burned, forbidden to speak and bidden to knuckle under to the authorities, of necessity they threw themselves on God's protecting care, even as they entrusted their eternal souls to Him.

What led to that warm Saturday afternoon?

While **October 31, A.D., 1517**, is Reformation Day, a better description would name it as the *beginning* of the Reformation. It is a birthday, but as with a child's birth, the growth and maturation were still to come. A meatier and more mature celebration is **June 25, A.D., 1530**, the date on which the Augsburg Confession was presented to the emperor. During those 13 years, the evangelicals (as the Lutherans were called at the time) became a vital force in restoring and advancing the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Our introduction to the Augsburg Confession will examine three major threads that influence all of history. The history of people and of nations is formed by *political, religious and social* forces that bear down on them. Pulling on each thread will allow us to see the forces that write history, putting the three threads back together will allow us to set the stage for the Augsburg Confession.

We start with what Lutherans know best, religious history. However, we often move quickly from one sphere to another, as so many times the political and social elements are joined together with what is happening in the religious sphere.

The Ninety-five Theses were posted in a decade of deep corruption in the Roman Catholic Church. It has been said of these years that "Never has official religion been at a lower ebb, or

the public imagery of Christianity more defaced.”² The closer one came to Rome, the more corruption one saw. In the 2003 movie *Luther*, the depiction of prostitutes for priests and a cold, fiscal fleecing of the sheep was no exaggeration from the reality at Rome.

Everyone realized the need for a reformation of the Church. Not a few recognized the papacy as the problem. While the Roman Catholic Church held many faithful Christians and godly theologians, nevertheless, the papacy held such a corrupting influence on the Catholic Church that godliness was often condemned and faithfulness might mean execution.

Not everyone saw the teachings of the Scriptures as the solution – this is the Spirit-born conviction that made Martin Luther the great Reformer. He worked not from power nor from church constitution, but from the Word of God.

Immediately we must crossover from religious history to political history, for the papacy simply was not a religious institution. It was a political wolf in religious clothes. The papacy had an army; forged political alliances; had palace intrigue. The papacy claimed control over all secular authorities, and would make political leaders knuckle under by refusing the administration of the Sacraments in the domain of a king who refused to obey.³

The papacy was not the only political power at the time, however. A new sense of nationalism was sweeping across Europe. An English nationalist, Henry VIII ascended the throne in 1485. France’s monarchy began to claim that secular authority overrides papal authority in secular matters, and was willing to defend this claim with military incursions against the papacy. Ferdinand and Isabella united Spain into a powerful, new, nationalistic monarchy and launched a Spanish Empire flung around the globe.

The most curious political state is the Holy Roman Empire (HRE). Claiming to be the rightful heir to the power of the ancient Roman Empire, the Empire was mostly Germanic and scattered among a confusing array of fiefdoms, duchies and protectorates. No German empire would arise until the 1800’s. However, the Holy Roman Empire was the political stage under which the Reformation began; the ruler of the HRE, Charles V, would be the first person to hear the Augsburg Confession. German nationalism was a compelling political drive within the HRE.

In the Church, numerous confessors had sought reform. John Wycliffe of England, John Hus of Bohemia and Girolama Savonarola of Italy were three famous voices who called for Christian renewal. Wycliffe urged publication of the Scriptures in the language of the people. Hus claimed that the papacy and Church Councils can and do err. All three identified the papacy as the Antichrist. Hus was burned at the stake; Savonarola was hanged and burned; after Wycliffe’s death, his body was exhumed and burned. Reformers were met with deadly opposition by the papacy.

² *Eerdman’s Handbook to The History of Christianity*. Dowley, Tim, ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977, p. 359

³ The most famous case in history occurs in 1077. Henry IV of Germany crossed the Alps to appeal to Pope Gregory VII. He had been excommunicated for appointing his own bishops in France. For three days he knelt in the snow to show his earnestness. Finally the Pope consented to lift the excommunication, but every leader in Europe learned the lesson – you shall not mess with the papacy.

When Luther posted the 95 Theses, he merely called for debate. However, he soon repeated the words that led to Hus' condemnation – that Church Councils can and do err – and was branded a heretic. He was called to the Diet (Congress) of Worms for one purpose: to recant of all his writings. His words “Here I stand, I can do no other,” became the earnest cry for freedom of conscience that resounds in Western culture to this day. However, in 1421, the year in which he spoke those words, he was condemned. One would expect that Luther would become the next heretic burned at the stake.

Pope Leo X saw to it that Luther was excommunicated. The sleight-of-hand that the papacy regularly employed was then put into effect. Charles V's role as Emperor was to protect all *Christians* within his Christian realm. But – voilà – Luther was no longer a Christian (he was excommunicated) and therefore the Emperor was not his protector, but the agency by which he would be hunted down and burned at the stake as a true “out-law.” The Edict of Worms of 1521 declared Luther an outlaw of the Empire, not just a heretic of the Roman Church. He would not be appearing at Augsburg because of this ban.

At this time, God's providence was given through the political province of the Elector of Saxony, Frederick the Wise. By his guidance, Luther was “kidnapped” and taken to the Wartburg Castle, where he would live in exile. His life was in imminent danger. Perhaps the most surprising thing of Luther's entire life is that he died of natural causes. Prior to Luther, and for many years after, those banned as heretics died at the stake, on the gallows or under torture.

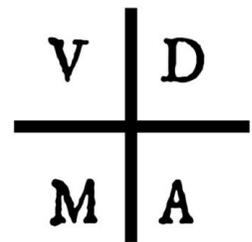
The Elector of Saxony could exert such power because he was an “elector.” One of the seven political leaders who chose the emperor of the HRE, Frederick wielded a lot of power both in persuasion and in politics. His domain of Saxony would furnish the platform from which the Reformation would emerge.

Emperor Charles V faced more than a religious question in Germany, however. The Emperor's hands were tied by military conflicts with the King of France and the Pope. Back in Germany, while the Emperor was away, the theologians made hay. Through simple preaching and instruction in the Word, many souls realized the teaching of the Bible was not in accord with the doctrine of the Church, and that it was not just outward corruption that plagued the Church, but the central teaching of the faith had been lost.

In Saxony and large portions of Germany, this “evangelical” teaching was making headway. Laymen and theologians were learning the truth and taking a stand on biblical faith rather than trusting the papacy. By the time Charles concluded peace with France and the papacy, evangelical teaching was rooted in the hearts and souls of many believers.



By the Diet of Speyer (Speier/Spires) five years later (1526), the evangelical princes inscribed over their coat of arms the inscription: *Verbum Dei manet in aeternum*, “the Word of God remains to eternity.” In the course of the centuries, the inscription was abbreviated to four letters, and remains a sound inscription for every Lutheran heart, if not their coat of arms. Laymen then and laymen now hold to this creed, VDMA.



The Diet of Speyer of 1526 gave a certain freedom to the evangelicals. For instance, a printer was no longer under a death threat for printing a copy of Luther's works. Lutheran teaching was allowed in those places where the political leader allowed it, meaning much of northern Germany.

The three years following this Diet of Speyer promoted the cause of the Gospel. Luther, Philip Melancthon and Johannes Bugenhagen conducted visitations to strengthen the pastor / priests, and in turn the gospel was coming home to many more hearts. The Small Catechism and the Large Catechism were both published in 1529, great tools for strengthening homes and parishes. The churches of Germany were being organized according to evangelical principles rather than the dominion of the papacy.⁴

While the evangelicals were growing in conviction and in numbers, Charles used these same years to conclude treaties. In 1528, he struck a peace accord with the Pope, removing the threat to his empire of military incursion by the papal armies. His part of the bargain was that he would use all of his political force to suppress the Lutheran "heresy."

In 1529, he concluded peace with Francis I of France, each ruler promising to suppress the Reformation within his realm. With his political back safe through these alliances, he would press forward to unite his realm. A second Diet of Speyer met in 1529, and it did not go well for the Reformers. Charles' brother, Ferdinand of Austria, presided over the meeting. Catholic princes were in the majority, and once again declared the Edict of Worms to be in effect. In other words, all Lutheran teaching was condemned and Lutheran "heretics" were to be exterminated. It was meant to be the death knell of the Reformation.

The Lutheran princes did what they could do – drawing up a formal protest to defend their faith and practice. Their protest gave them a name that lives to this day – the Protestants. Their formal document was not received by Ferdinand at all, and received an icy reception from Charles when they sent it to him instead. He had agreed with the Pope that Lutheranism would be stricken from the Empire, first by promises to the Lutheran princes, then by threats as necessary and finally by force if the first two failed.⁵ Ferdinand of Austria, the Pope of Rome and the Emperor's own forces would come down on the Lutheran states with exterminating vigor.

While Charles was now free from European back-stabbing, free to crush Lutheranism, a new political problem developed which would cause him to fall back on the support of every elector. This threat arose not only against his empire, but against all of Europe and all of the Church. Islam had arisen in Arabia in the 600's A.D., pushed its way across the Middle East, north Africa and the Balkans in the intervening centuries. Spain had been under Islamic rule (the Moors) beginning in the 700's A.D.

By 1529, Suleiman the Magnificent would lay siege to Vienna in the heart of Europe. While this marked the high point of the Islamic incursion into central Europe, the threat to the Empire and to Charles himself was real. Suleiman carried with him an emperor's crown, which he intended

⁴ Neve, J.L. *The Augsburg Confession*. Philadelphia, PA: The Lutheran Publication Society, 1914, p. 37

⁵ Neve, p. 38

to have placed on his head after the overthrow of Charles.⁶ [A second defeat of the Islamic forces at a second Battle of Vienna in 1683 would mark the degrading of Islamic power – not to be renewed until modern times.]

Charles V called the Empire into assembly at Augsburg for several reasons. He must fend off the Islamic threat. He intended to have all his empire united under the Roman Catholic faith, the better to unite his armies against the Islamic threat. A dire situation faced Charles and all the princes and theologians at Augsburg.

He also was answering a call that the Lutherans had been extending for a long time. They asked for a General Council, a synod, a diet, to address the issues of the Christian faith. The Lutherans believed that their case was solid, and if they were able to present it, the Church could be united, not under the papacy, but under the restoration of the Word. They wanted a Church Council to put into effect the central work of the Reformation. Charles had promised them such a council and the Diet of Augsburg was a partial answer.

As mentioned above, the Lutherans knew that *confessions* were the answer to these trying times, just as the three great Creeds had confessed and defined the faith for centuries. The Lutherans had been calling for Rome to make such a confession, but none was forthcoming, as one might expect from a political state. “Between the Athanasian Creed ... and the sixteenth century, there is no new General Creed. ... [The Lutheran Church] has the oldest distinctive Creed now in use in any large division of Christendom. That Creed is the Confession of Augsburg.”⁷

Social and economic tides also affected the Church as the assembly gathered at Augsburg. The background noise of the day includes the constant threat of the Black Plague and an accompanying understanding of the threat of death. The “black death” and the Turk (Islam) both arrived in Europe in the middle of the 1300’s and both affected European thinking for hundreds of years. Dealing with death was not a matter of hospice and palliative care for the Church in 1530, it was an ever-present haunting.

Economically, the times were agitated. The feudal system was coming to an end, and the rise of what will be called capitalism is at hand. The peasants will look at the Reformation not only as a religious movement, but as a chance to overthrow their overlords; to take to themselves liberty and land that they could not claim in a lifetime of serfdom. Many looked to Luther as a political champion, and when he had earlier urged the nobility to crush the Peasants’ War (1524-1525) the peasants felt betrayed by his stand.

1492 marked Columbus’ discovery of America. Among the many changes this effected is an economic boom in Europe that continues to this day. This boom is not in full bloom as the confessors arrive at Augsburg, but the discovery of the New World would enrich European (and Christian) coffers, prosper business, and open new mission fields. It is hard to overstate what an economic effect the New World had on the Old.

⁶ Neve, p. 39

⁷ Krauth, Charles Porterfield. *The Conservative Reformation and Its Theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978. Krauth, p. 215, 216.

The invention of the printing press in 1448 and the use of moveable type by Johannes Gutenberg is a second social change that continues unabated to this day. The Ninety-Five Theses became a flashpoint of reformation because they could be reprinted and discussed across Europe in a very short period of time. Freed from the time-consuming method of hand copying a manuscript, Reformation and Counter Reformation documents would be broadcast across Europe. With the arrival of printing, for the first time it would be possible for a Christian to hold in his hands a copy of the Bible. While books will remain expensive and rare for a considerable period of time, they were at least possible as the Reformation began. And copies of the Augsburg Confession, as well as other confessional writings would circulate freely, no matter what religious or political opposition they might face. Gutenberg changed the world of the Reformation as much as the internet has changed the 21st Century.

To understand the time of the Augsburg Confession, we must also understand European thinking and learning. “Humanism” became the new way of thinking replacing the “Scholasticism” of medieval times. Humanism is not what a 21st Century reader will think of, however.

It is best to understand the humanism of the Reformation era as a study of, and love for, the humanities – literature, music, art, philosophy. One might assert that the Reformation began not as a religious pursuit, but as an educational method. What we understand as the Renaissance is little more than a re-discovery of the humanities. Scholars began, first to read ancient Greek and Roman texts, then they began to emulate classical thinking and learning.

One of the ancient Greek texts, of course, was the New Testament. When clergy, collegiates and commoners began to understand again what the New Testament actually *said*, the Reformation was, in some ways, a foregone conclusion. The 21st century layman and pastor is not surprised at this, but it was revolutionary in the 1500’s – the Word changes the times, the Church and the status of a sinner. What our readers know so well – the Word works – was arriving at the time of the Reformation almost as an accidental aftermath of the growing love of the humanities.

Back on the religious front, freedom from the papacy did not mean unity among the Reformers. They all had a common enemy, but they did not have communion. The path of the Lutherans has been called “the conservative Reformation” and “the narrow Lutheran middle.” These terms properly name what the Lutheran Reformers intended. They were not rejecting the Church, in fact they loved the Church and her history. They would cite the history of the Church as part of their attack on the papacy.

The mightiest weapon which the Reformation employed against Rome was, not Rome’s errors, but Rome’s truths. It professed to make no discoveries, to find no unheard-of interpretations; but taking the Scriptures in that very sense to which the greatest of her writers had assented, uncovering the law and the gospel of God which she retained, applying them as her most distinguished and most honored teachers had applied them, though she had made them of none effect by her traditions, the Reformation took into its heart the life-stream of sixteen centuries... There was no fear of truth simply because Rome held it, and no disposition to embrace error, because it might be employed with

*advantage to Rome's injury. ... They allowed no authority save to the word of God, but they listened respectfully to the witness of believers of all time.*⁸

The Lutherans kept all they could of the theology, sacraments, rites and practices of the Roman Church. To this day, the pastors of the Lutheran Church celebrate the Sacraments, wear gowns and conduct liturgy. We did not invent these beloved signs of God's presence among us; we inherited them from our mother, the Church.

There were other Reformers, however, who claimed that the Lutherans did not go far enough – that the Lutherans were too compromising and essentially too Catholic. They would begin to call themselves the “Reformed” church, claiming that they were the true Reformers and the Lutherans were only a stepping stone to the Reformation.

Two names will always stand out in this part of the Reformation, Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin. Calvin will become a major influence after the Diet of Augsburg. Zwingli is the Reformer pertinent to the Augsburg Confession.

Following the ways of a rational humanism, Zwingli rejected many things Lutherans upheld. The easiest point to understand is the debate over the Sacraments. As with our brothers and sisters of the first 1500 years of Christianity, the Lutherans accepted infant baptism, taught that real regeneration happens in the water of Holy Baptism and that Baptism is a “sacrament” – a sacred act that effects life and not an “ordinance” – an act of obedience to God's command.

Regarding Holy Communion, Lutherans taught then what they confess today, that we receive bread and wine and under the bread we receive nothing less than the body of Christ; under the wine we receive nothing less than the blood of our Savior. The physical elements we can see and receive are “in communion” with the elements we receive but cannot see. We are in communion with Jesus by receiving His body and blood.

The camp of Zwingli rejected this teaching because it was not reasonable. Human reasoning would at times trump the Scripture in the teachings of Zwingli and Calvin. Calvin would later formulate the classic Reformed statement on why they reject the Real Presence of the body and blood of Jesus in Holy Communion. His defining rejection was that “the finite is not capable of the infinite.”⁹ While that is reasonable, and even pious sounding, it overlooks not only the words “This is My body,” but also the center of salvation – that the *finite* body of a man called Jesus *was*, in fact, *capable of the infinite* person of the Son of God. In the differences expressed regarding Holy Communion, a larger rift regarding the very person of Jesus is exposed.

Everyone knew that a divided house among the Reformers might mean extermination of all the Reformers. Neither the papal nor the Islamic armies wished them well. One of the Lutheran princes, Philip of Hesse tried to forge an agreement between the Lutherans and the Reformed. Luther and Zwingli met in person at Philip's castle city of Marburg to seek common accord on these issues. This meeting is known in history as the Marburg Colloquy.

⁸ Krauth, p. 203

⁹ *finitum non capax infiniti*

Two important written documents come from this conference and both of them will be woven into the Augsburg Confession. The seventeen Schwabach Articles were written by Luther, Melanchthon and others to prepare for the conference at Marburg. These articles are written sometime during the summer of 1529 and formally published in October, 1529.

The Marburg Colloquy (a “colloquy” is a discussion searching for agreement) took place October 2-4, 1529. Fourteen articles were the basis of debate, and all were agreed upon except the Fourteenth Article. (Later the Reformed camp would reveal that they did not necessarily agree with everything in the first thirteen articles, but they were willing to bend for the sake of political unity. The Lutherans were not interested in bending doctrine to any outward unity, political or otherwise.)

The story of the Fourteenth Article on the doctrine of Holy Communion is colorful. Zwingli and Luther literally sat across the table from one another during much of these three days. Regarding Holy Communion, it is said that Luther wrote on the table itself the words: *Hoc est meus corpus*, “This is My body.” Zwingli believed that the bread and wine only represented the body and blood of Christ. Luther said what Lutherans say, learning it from Jesus. “Is” means “is.” This is the body of Jesus Christ. We receive the blood of Christ under the wine of Holy Communion.

Because of the words on the table, compromise was out the window – the Lutherans were upholding the words of Christ, but would be pilloried by the rest of the Reformation camp as being too Catholic. On the road to Augsburg, the Marburg Colloquy is significant because the articles of discussion drawn up for this meeting, the Marburg Articles, were also material used to write the Augsburg Confession.

One other set of confessional statements leads up to the Augsburg Confession. Charles V set the stage for the Diet of Augsburg and urged everyone to share their “opinions, thoughts and notions.”¹⁰ John the Steadfast, Elector of Saxony, successor to his faithful brother Frederick the Wise, asked the Wittenberg theologians to prepare this statement of opinions, thoughts and notions. They were only too happy to oblige, as this was the council they had been requesting.

Luther, Melanchthon, Bugenhagen and Justas Jonas met to prepare these statements. By March of 1530, they were ready to present their work to Elector John at his castle in Torgau, thus their work became known as the Torgau Articles. These three documents form the spine of the articles of confession of the Augsburg Confession.

One Roman Catholic source also is part of the story of the Confession’s writing. A Catholic document that can only be called slander was written by John Eck to countermand the Lutheran teaching. The “404 Articles” as the document was known, equated Lutheran teaching with ancient heresies, blamed them for the excesses that occurred among the radical reformers, and sought to say the evangelicals were opposed to the most basic Christian truths.

This slanderous document could not be allowed to stand, but it gave structure to the nature of the evangelical confession. The Augsburg Confession has 28 Articles. The first 21 deal with the

¹⁰ McCain, Paul Timothy, Robert Cleveland Baker, Gene Edward Veith, and Edward Andrew Engelbrecht, eds. *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions. A Reader's Edition of the Book of Concord*. Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2005.p. 23

positive teachings of the Lutherans. They are simple, ancient, biblical statements of faith. Many of them would be agreeable to all parties in the debate. These articles make it clear that the Lutherans were not a radical group or that they were promoting new doctrines. They were confessing the solid faith of the Scriptures and the Church Fathers. By stating what they believe and teach, as well as what they condemn, they expressed the ancient faith of the holy, Christian Church.

In Articles 22-28, the Augsburg Confession deals with abuses that had to be corrected. Even here, the Confession breathes a spirit of charity and fraternity. The Confession was not intended to poke a finger in the Church's eye, even to disparage the papacy. The Confession was and is conciliatory, intended to *confess* the faith of all of Christendom. While it never achieved this goal, reading the Confession will lead any earnest Christian to realize that this *is* the faith, once for all delivered to the saints.

Who wrote the Augsburg Confession?

The Confession is written by a layman, a learned theologian, Philip Melanchthon – university professor, master of language, systematic thinker, a true genius. Compare Melanchthon's authorship of the Augsburg Confession to Thomas Jefferson's authorship of the Declaration of Independence. Neither man began the process from scratch. Many strains of proclamation came to their pens as they wrote the words. Jefferson could not write without the work of Franklin, Adams, Washington, Lee. Melanchthon depended upon a main source, Luther, but also had the help of the Wittenberg theologians and the entire evangelical movement.

Luther would later call the document “my Augsburg Confession.” His delight over the document and its presentation were profound. This is the moment they had all been waiting for – to say the faith in the presence of the leaders of the day. Some go overboard saying that Luther is the real author of the Augsburg Confession. He is not, neither in actual words nor in the framing of the argument. There's no doubt he is the guiding spirit used by the Spirit to make this confession, but the words, the clarity of thought, the winsome spirit and the confessional statements belong to Melanchthon.

Luther's assessment of the nature and gifts of the two scholars has generally been affirmed in history. “I am rough, boisterous, stormy and altogether warlike. . . . I must remove stumps and stones, cut away thistles and thorns and clear the wild forests, and Master Philip comes along softly and gently, sowing and watering with joy, according to the gifts which God has abundantly bestowed on him.”¹¹

When presented with a draft of the Augsburg Confession on May 15, Luther voiced his opinion:
*I have read the Apology [the Augsburg Confession] of Philip, from beginning to end; it pleases me exceedingly well, and I know of nothing by which I could better it, or change it, nor would I be fitted to do it, for I cannot move so moderately and gently. May Christ our Lord help, that it may bring forth much and great fruit, as we hope and pray. Amen.*¹²

¹¹ González, Justo L. *A History of Christian Thought*, Vol. III – From the Protestant Reformation to the Twentieth Century. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1987, p. 104.

¹² Krauth, p. 234

Upon hearing of the Confession's presentation, Luther cited the Bible verse that is now inscribed at the head of the Confession: *I will speak of Thy testimonies before kings, and will not be put to shame.* – Psalm 119:46. He was delighted that the truths that had begun to claim his heart by October 31, 1517, were now out in the open, confessed before the Emperor, confessed by the princes, confessed in the face of papal opposition.

It would have been good if Melancthon would have treated the Augsburg Confession the same way Jefferson treated the Declaration of Independence after its presentation. The Declaration stands steady to this day, for better or for worse. Melancthon continued to treat the Augsburg Confession as if it belonged to him, rather than to the confession of those who presented it. He would change words, sometimes weakening the arguments to allow for compromise. Some of our churches have on their cornerstone the letters "U.A.C." This emphasis is on the "U."

The *Unaltered* Augsburg Confession is our confession. The compromising phrases Melancthon later used are called the "variations" on the Augsburg Confession, known by a Latin name, the *Variata*. Whether it is on the church cornerstone or not, we are all churches of the U.A.C.

On to Augsburg

Luther could not attend the Diet of Augsburg; he was still under the Emperor's ban. His attendance would have resulted in arrest and probably death. He remained at the safety of the Coburg Castle, 130 miles away.

Elector John the Steadfast was the principle Lutheran prince, but others who signed the Confession include George of Brandenburg and Philip of Hesse. The leading theologian was Melancthon. Elector John set up a special courier service between Augsburg and Coburg so that Luther was able to correspond as developments occurred. It appears that correspondence would take three or four days each way.¹³

Elector John arrived on May 2, while Emperor Charles was delayed until late in June. His arrival summoned the Lutheran princes to courage, as they refused to kneel to receive the papal ambassador's blessing, either in the procession or in a special Mass.

Charles and his brother, Ferdinand of Austria met with the Lutheran princes privately, and that meeting is the stuff of legends. They forbade any Lutheran services or preaching during the Diet. They commanded that the evangelical princes attend the Corpus Christi festival with the Emperor. It was George of Brandenburg who spoke for all Lutherans of all time. He refused Charles' demands with the words "Before I let anyone take from me the Word of God and ask me to deny my God, I will kneel and let them strike off my head."¹⁴

3:00, Saturday afternoon, June 25, A.D., 1530

What they were about to hear is what you will hear this morning, dear delegates of the Western Wisconsin District.

¹³ Krauth, p. 228

¹⁴ McCain, p. 25

Social changes led to this moment – the specter of the Black Plague and a constant understanding of the brevity of life; the rise of a middle class and the arrival of capitalism; the ability to print and distribute literature including this Confession; the spread of the humanities to enlighten society's leaders; the discovery of the New World to enrich the Old.

Political changes lead to this moment – the rise and formation of nations on the continent and in England; a rising spirit of German nationalism; the presence of papal armies; an Emperor who intended to unite his Empire under the banner of the Roman Church; the clear and present danger of Islamic armies only 300 miles away at Vienna.

Religious changes led to this moment – the spirit of *sola gratia, sola fide, sola Scriptura*, grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone was sweeping across northern Europe; papal intransigence and corruption; the division amongst the various elements of the Reformation.

With all these as background, **Chancellor Beyer stood to speak on that warm Saturday afternoon on June 25, 1530, A.D.** I cede to Master Philip to bring this living confession before you today.

Bibliography

Eerdman's Handbook to The History of Christianity. Dowley, Tim, ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977

Grimm, Harold J. *The Reformation Era, 1500-1650*. New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1973

González, Justo L. *A History of Christian Thought*, Vol. III – From the Protestant Reformation to the Twentieth Century. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1987.

González, Justo L. *The Story of Christianity*, Vol. 2 – The Reformation to the Present Day. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1985

Krauth, Charles Porterfield. *The Conservative Reformation and Its Theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978

McCain, Paul Timothy, Robert Cleveland Baker, Gene Edward Veith, and Edward Andrew Engelbrecht, eds. *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions. A Reader's Edition of the Book of Concord*. Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2005.

Neve, J.L. *The Augsburg Confession*. Philadelphia, PA: The Lutheran Publication Society, 1914. [Available online: archive.org/stream/augsburgconfessi00neve#page/6/mode/2up]

<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/harnack/creed.ii.iii.html> Christian Classics Ethereal Library, by Adolf Harnack.