

# **THE DOCTRINAL CONTENT & IMPACT OF THE AUGSBURG CONFESSION**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Before tracing the doctrinal content and impact of the Augsburg Confession one must answer the question, “What is the Augsburg Confession?” Is it the charter of the Lutheran church, a document defining one particular theological school to which we happen to belong? Or is the Augsburg Confession a true confession witnessing to the truth of Holy Scripture, and therefore a document belonging to the entire Church?

Most of Christendom would answer that it is the former. The Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches consider the church of the Augsburg Confession, at most, a sick, weakly branch of Christianity. Those of Reformed and Evangelical background consider Lutherans to be bad Protestants who were unable to let go of the traditions of Rome. Many Lutherans themselves have bought into the almost-universal opinion that no church body owns the truth, but each has its own distinctive take and emphasizes one portion of the truth at the expense of others. To them, the Augsburg Confession cannot be anything more than the document that delineates the boundaries of Lutheranism.

But those who drafted and signed the Augsburg Confession understood it as something much more than a rallying cry for their particular theological school. They would hardly have been so quick to stake their lives on something that they did not consider to be a true and accurate expression of the doctrine of Holy Scripture. Furthermore, their condemnations of ancient heresies and frequent appeals to the church fathers show that they were not interested in drawing boundary lines around a new sect. Those who confessed their faith before Charles V did so with the conviction that they were taking a stand on the truth of Holy Scripture, and therefore staking a place alongside every member of Christ’s one holy Christian Church.

If they were right, and if the Augsburg Confession is in fact a true witness to the doctrine of Holy Scripture, then we would do well to consider its doctrinal content—and with more than historical curiosity. For if we are to be Confessional Lutherans, then we must be confessors of the truth of Holy Scripture. We must be prepared to give an answer before the world as to the faith that we hold, and we must do so with the conviction that it is the same answer we will give when we stand before the throne of God almighty.<sup>1</sup>

With that kind of boldness and conviction, then, the impact of the Augsburg Confession will not be lost on us. It will serve in its role as a witness to the truth of Holy Scripture, and as we confess the doctrinal truths contained within it we will join with the whole Church of all time, taking our stand alongside those who have confessed the truth in ages past as well as those who will do the same in future days.

## **THE DOCTRINAL CONTENT OF THE AUGSBURG CONFESSION**

The best way to get a handle on the doctrinal content of the Augsburg Confession is to read it. It is not a long document, and one can begin by reading only the first twenty-one articles which consist of the positive statements of belief. But perhaps it would be beneficial to highlight a few notable features about its doctrinal content and cite examples to illustrate these characteristics, give a birds’ eye overview of all the articles, and examine a few in greater detail.

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<sup>1</sup> “Whoever makes his confession concerning Jesus as Christ and Lord is putting his entire earthly existence at stake, is literally risking his life. That is the normal state of affairs. But he is not merely standing before an earthly judge, but before the Judge of heaven. A confessor is constantly standing at the boundary between time and eternity, between eternal life and eternal death...As a confession of faith reaches from time to eternity, so the confession of faith made here on earth finds its continuation in heaven. The Author of our faith is also its Finisher.” Sasse, Hermann. *Letters to Lutheran Pastors, Volume 1*. Matthew Harrison, ed. Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2013, p. 33.

First, the doctrinal content of the Augsburg Confession is rather expansive. While it is not exhaustive in its treatment of doctrine, it does cover a large amount of Scriptural territory. This in part is what has made the Augsburg Confession such an important document. Its scope extends beyond the specific charges that were being leveled against the Lutheran churches.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, it covers topics from the doctrine of the Trinity<sup>3</sup> to the sacraments and their appropriate use<sup>4</sup> as well as civil government<sup>5</sup> and Christ's return at the Last Day.<sup>6</sup> All of this and more is covered before addressing some of the most virulent questions of the day, such as the marriage of priests<sup>7</sup> and the issue of authority in the church.<sup>8</sup>

Readers today might wish that the Augsburg Confession included even more articles. One will not find an article on hot-button doctrines such as creation or the inspiration of Scripture. In reality, this is to be expected given that such doctrines were not in serious debate at the time. A careful reader will also note that the Augsburg Confession assumes such doctrines, even if it neglects to state them specifically.<sup>9</sup>

The Augsburg Confession draws its doctrinal content from Holy Scripture, following its contours and seeking to express those doctrines which Holy Scripture itself expresses. That this was its intent is directly stated in the Preface to the Augsburg Confession: "It shows, from the Holy Scriptures and God's pure Word, what has been up to this time presented in our lands, dukedoms, dominions, and cities, and taught in our churches."<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, throughout the various articles of the Augsburg Confession one finds direct references to Holy Scripture. So in Article XI, for example, while noting that private confession is in itself a worthy practice, the confession appeals to Psalm 119 to demonstrate that a full listing of sins is not only unnecessary, but even impossible:

Our churches teach that private Absolution should be retained in the churches, although listing all sins is not necessary for Confession. For, according to the Psalm, it is impossible. "Who can discern his errors?"<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> At least, that is, beyond the charges that were made in earnest. Many outlandish charges were also raised in attempts to smear the Lutherans as those who were teaching resurrected heresies.

<sup>3</sup> AC I

<sup>4</sup> AC IX, X, and XIII

<sup>5</sup> AC XVI

<sup>6</sup> AC XVII

<sup>7</sup> AC XXIII

<sup>8</sup> AC XXVIII. Melancthon did avoid the most inflammatory issue, the identification of the papacy as the antichrist.

<sup>9</sup> "Often, readers of the Confession initially miss its use of the Wittenberg doctrine of creation, in its affirmation of the holiness of normal daily life, lived out in faith, and they often ignore that the Holy Spirit is at work in every mention of the Word of God in its oral, written, and sacramental forms." Arand, Charles P., Robert Kolb, and James A. Nestingen. *The Lutheran Confessions: History and Theology of the Book of Concord*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012, p. 113.

<sup>10</sup> AC Preface, 8. This and all subsequent quotes from the Augsburg Confession cited from: 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.

<sup>11</sup> Article XI

To present the doctrine of Scripture accurately is no small task. Those who drafted the Augsburg Confession did so with great care, making use of the ancient, tested formulas for expressing doctrinal truths that had been hammered out in the early centuries of church history and codified in the creeds. Article III, by its own admission, is barely more than a repeat of the Creed:

There is one Christ, true God and true man, who was born of the Virgin Mary, truly suffered, was crucified, died, and was buried...He also descended into hell, and truly rose again on the third day. Afterward, He ascended into heaven to sit at the right hand of the Father. There He forever reigns and has dominion over all creatures...The same Christ will openly come again to judge the living and the dead, and so forth, according to the Apostles' Creed.<sup>12</sup>

That the Augsburg Confession uses such tried and true formulas is evidence of its sensitivity to catholicity.<sup>13</sup> Those who drafted the confession were not interested in inventing new doctrines, but only in giving the clearest possible expression to the chief articles of faith as presented in Scripture and as the true Church has always taught in every age.

As further evidence for this, the confessors mustered testimonies from the ancient church fathers and included them in the Augsburg Confession as well. A good example is found in Article XVIII, where, after quoting 1 Corinthians 2:14, the article goes on to include a quote from Augustine: "This is what Augustine says in his *Hypognosticon*, Book III..."<sup>14</sup>

In addition, the articles of the Augsburg Confession make a point of condemning those false teachings which were condemned by the early church. So when the doctrine of the Trinity is stated in Article I, the Augsburg Confession states:

Our churches condemn all heresies that arose against this article, such as the Manicheans, who assumed that there are two "principles," one Good and the other Evil. They also condemn the Valentinians, Arians, Eunomians, Muslims, and all heresies such as these. Our churches also condemn the Samosatenes, old and new, who contend that God is but one person.<sup>15</sup>

In fact, any false teaching which threatened to undermine the true teaching of Scripture is noted and condemned in the articles of the Augsburg Confession. These condemnations can be very specific because they are addressed at a particular opinion commonly held at the time. The Roman Catholic understanding that the sacraments justify simply by going through the motions<sup>16</sup> is an example of a teaching which is plainly stated and condemned: "They condemn those who teach that the Sacraments justify simply by the act of

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<sup>12</sup> AC III, 3-6

<sup>13</sup> Lower-case "c" catholic means universal; pertaining to the whole Church of all time

<sup>14</sup> AC XVIII, 4

<sup>15</sup> AC I, 5-6

<sup>16</sup> *ex opere operato* ("by the work being worked")

doing them.”<sup>17</sup> Or consider the condemnation of Anabaptists in Article IX: “Our churches condemn the Anabaptists, who reject the Baptism of children, and say that children are saved without Baptism.”<sup>18</sup>

While these condemnations may sound harsh and polemical to modern ears, they are essential to the doctrinal content of the Augsburg Confession. One must be able not only to express the true teaching of Scripture, but also to recognize and guard against false understandings of it. Otherwise doctrinal clarity will be obscured and doctrinal truth will be compromised.

In pointing out error, there is a need for the sort of specificity that is laid out in some of the articles of the Augsburg Confession. In fact, one needs only to look at the controversies that erupted among Lutherans themselves in the years after 1530 regarding to the Lord’s Supper to find ample evidence of the need to be specific in this regard.

Article X of the Augsburg Confession had succinctly stated: “Our churches teach that the body and blood of Christ are truly present and distributed to those who eat the Lord’s Supper. They reject those who teach otherwise.”<sup>19</sup> With this broad statement the Augsburg Confession sought to cover all false teachings. Later Lutherans, struggling against subtle ways of misconstruing the real presence, found it necessary to state even more specifically those false understandings of the Lord’s Supper which had arisen. Article VII of the Formula of Concord is an expansion of Article X of the Augsburg Confession, stating those false teachings which are to be rejected with more specificity.<sup>20</sup>

Within the framework of this expansive, careful treatment of Scriptural teaching, the Augsburg Confession gives clear expression to the doctrine that undoubtedly was most at stake, the teaching that God justifies sinners by faith alone. The Reformers had discovered that centuries of an approach emphasizing human ritual action and hierarchy as the means by which God’s grace was to be obtained<sup>21</sup> had obscured this most foundational article of faith. Article IV is really the heart and core of the doctrinal content of the Augsburg Confession:

Our churches teach that people cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works. People are freely justified for Christ’s sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake. By His death, Christ made satisfaction for our sins. God counts this faith for righteousness in His sight.<sup>22</sup>

Because of its importance, many have quite appropriately deemed Article IV of the Augsburg Confession the “chief article” or the “article on which the church stands or falls.”<sup>23</sup> Other articles of the Augsburg Confession appeal to Article IV, as in Article XV: “They are also reminded that human traditions instituted to

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<sup>17</sup> AC XIII, 3

<sup>18</sup> AC IX, 3

<sup>19</sup> AC X, 1-2

<sup>20</sup> The Formula of Concord condemns an impressive list of twenty-one errors concerning the Lord’s Supper.

<sup>21</sup> Arand, p. 105.

<sup>22</sup> AC IV

<sup>23</sup> McCain, p. 58.

make atonement with God, to merit grace, and to make satisfaction for sins are opposed to the Gospel and the doctrine of faith.”<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, the division of the Augsburg Confession into “Chief Articles of Faith” and “A Review of the Various Abuses That Have Been Corrected” demonstrates the pervasiveness of justification by faith alone in overturning any church practice that threatened to obscure it. Articles XXII through XXVIII are really nothing more than the practical ramifications of Article IV in the life of the church.

Table 1. Outline of the Augsburg Confession<sup>25</sup>

Chief Articles of Faith		A Review of the Various Abuses That Have Been Corrected	
Article	Title	Article	Title
I	God	XXII	Both Kinds in the Sacrament
II	Original Sin	XXIII	The Marriage of Priests
III	The Son of God	XXIV	The Mass
IV	Justification	XXV	Confession
V	The Ministry	XXVI	The Distinction of Meats
VI	New Obedience	XXVII	Monastic Vows
VII	The Church	XXVIII	Church Authority
VIII	What the Church Is		
IX	Baptism		
X	The Lord’s Supper		
XI	Confession		
XII	Repentance		
XIII	The Use of the Sacraments		
XIV	Order in the Church		
XV	Church Ceremonies		
XVI	Civil Government		
XVII	Christ’s Return for Judgment		
XVIII	Free Will		
XIX	The Cause of Sin		
XX	Good Works		
XXI	Worship of the Saints		

<sup>24</sup> AC XV, 3

<sup>25</sup> All titles taken from McCain, p. 52.

The doctrinal content of the Augsburg Confession, then, is summarized in the first twenty-one articles. Beginning with God, Articles I through VIII describe the plight of mankind due to sin and the salvation which God brought about, how salvation is obtained through faith and what faith does, and how the Church is the result of God's saving action which comes about through the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments.

Articles IX through XV expand on the theme that God gives his grace through the means of grace, which required a different understanding of repentance than that which was present in medieval theology.<sup>26</sup> Articles XVI shifts gears to discuss civil government, before returning to the subject of Christ's return in Article XVII.

The next three articles Philip Melanchthon added on his own.<sup>27</sup> Article XVIII gives Melanchthon an opportunity to weigh in on the debate that Luther held with Erasmus over the topic of the freedom of the will, and Article XIX adds a necessary follow-up to affirm that God is not the cause of evil. Melanchthon evidently thought it a good idea to supply a more detailed understanding of the relationship between faith and good works, making Article XX an expansion of Article IV.<sup>28</sup>

The final article of the positive statements of belief describes how saints may be "honored, remembered, and imitated,"<sup>29</sup> but are not to be worshiped or prayed to.

Far from being irrelevant, the doctrinal content of the Augsburg Confession is just as vital in our day as it was on the day it was presented. Trinitarian and Christological errors have continued to reappear under different names,<sup>30</sup> so Articles I and III need not be passed over too quickly. Few in the visible church seem to accurately teach justification, the chief article of faith. Any pastor will be able to share with you countless conversations they have had with people who were confused about the sacraments or caught up in millennialism and false opinions about Christ's return. One could spend all day enumerating the doctrinal content of the Augsburg Confession and its importance, but perhaps we might dwell on just three of the articles that have much to say to us today: Articles II, V, and VII.

Very few Americans have a solid grasp on original sin, without which the beauty of justification by faith fades into the background. Article II provides an excellent summary of Scriptural teaching:

Our churches teach that since the fall of Adam (Romans 5:12), all who are naturally born are born with sin (Psalm 51:5), that is, without fear of God, without trust in God, and with the inclination to sin, called concupiscence. Concupiscence is a disease and original vice that is truly sin. It damns and

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<sup>26</sup> McCain, p. 63: "The Roman teaching about repentance was the spark that ignited the Lutheran Reformation...Repentance is not about 'paying off' God or making some satisfaction for our sin. Repentance is recognizing the reality of our sin and turning to God in faith for His mercy."

<sup>27</sup> Arand, p. 102.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>29</sup> McCain, p. 70.

<sup>30</sup> Such is what we find not only among cults like the Latter Day Saints and Jehovah's Witness, but even the confusion that is caused by the move away from a masculine divine name in the ELCA, to the point of using "Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier" in place of "Father, Son, Holy Spirit."

brings eternal death on those who are not born anew through Baptism and the Holy Spirit (John 3:5).<sup>31</sup>

The threefold definition of original sin is something every one of us should commit to memory. Note how nicely it dovetails with Luther's explanation of the First Commandment: original sin is the very opposite of that "fear, love, and trust in God above all things" that we ought to have. Thus original sin explains why, throughout the pages of Scripture, we find the greatest of God's saints fretting and worrying and doing anything but trusting God. It also explains why we so frequently worry and doubt and despair. We, like all who have come from Adam, are naturally inclined towards unbelief.

One might also note how Article II defines sin. Perhaps we think of sin as a label that is only applied to things that have been done or words that have been spoken or thoughts that have crossed the mind. But the Augsburg Confession is very clear in reminding us that original sin is sin, too. Sin is a condition, described as a "disease" and "vice," with which we are born. No wonder our Sunday morning confession of sins begins with "I confess that I am by nature sinful!"

Being clear on original sin and recognizing its seriousness and severity can only drive us to despair of ourselves. Indeed, this is the purpose which God has in revealing original sin to us. For if we are not brought to our knees to cry out to God for mercy, we will continue to imagine that there is something within us, some tiny little bit of us which is pleasing to God and which we can offer to God as our own righteousness. As the Augsburg Confession notes, those who deny or mitigate original sin end up "obscuring the glory of Christ's merit and benefits" and undermine the chief article, imagining that they can justify themselves by their own "strength and reason."<sup>32</sup>

Article V, titled "the ministry," describes the means of grace. Originally this article was a continuation of the previous article.<sup>33</sup> Even if it is numbered separately, it still must be seen in its close relation to Article IV. God's gift of justification by faith alone comes to us through the means of grace. This article, therefore, has deep ramifications for the life of the church.

Everything we do must be centered on the conviction that God has given us his Word and sacraments "that we may obtain this faith" and that through these means of grace "the Holy Spirit is given."<sup>34</sup> Might this change the way we think about worship and Bible study? If we understand that God shows up to give his gifts of grace and salvation wherever his means of grace are present, should we not be all the more eager to be present ourselves to receive these gifts?

Furthermore, consider how Article V sets us apart from the churches around us. A proper understanding of the means of grace leaves no room either for Roman Catholicism, which has never abandoned its *ex opere operato* view of the mass, even in the midst of raising its social gospel banners here in America, nor does it

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<sup>31</sup> AC II, 1,2

<sup>32</sup> AC II, 3

<sup>33</sup> Kolb, Robert, and Timothy J. Wengert, eds. *The Book of Concord: the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000, p. 40, includes an explanatory footnote stating: "Although later numbered as a separate article, grammatically this is a continuation of the preceding."

<sup>34</sup> AC V, 1,2



leave room for the megachurches around us who equate the coming of the Holy Spirit with an emotional reaction that can be produced by the right conditions.

Even within our own circles, do we sometimes begin to believe that the success or failure of a congregation is due to its style of “doing church” or the personality of the pastor? Might we not all benefit from a reminder “that not the faith and ethos of men create the congregation, but the means of grace, through which God calls His congregation?”<sup>35</sup> Is not the Augsburg Confession clear in reminding us that through the means of grace, faith is worked “when and where it pleases God (John 3:8)”<sup>36</sup>

Article V demands our careful study, that we may see all the more clearly on the pages of Scripture God’s commitment to working through the means of grace to justify “those who believe that they are received into grace for Christ’s sake.”<sup>37</sup>

Augsburg Confession Article VII should supply us with a greater understanding of Christ’s Church and our place within it, as well as giving us more courage to be diligent in our fellowship practices. The article begins by affirming Jesus’ promise that the gates of Hades will not prevail over his church (Matthew 16:18), but that “the one holy Church is to remain forever.”<sup>38</sup>

Considering that there is only one holy Church reminds us that the Augsburg Confession is not a Lutheran manifesto. We can and should take great comfort that the boundaries of Christ’s Church are not identical to the boundaries of WELS. All who cling in faith to Christ are members of this one Church.

At the same time, our own church body exists because we firmly believe that within our church “the doctrine of the Gospel” is truly taught and the “administration of the sacraments” is done properly.<sup>39</sup> So, while we gladly confess one Church and rejoice with all those who are members of it, we are also careful not to pretend that there is unity where unity does not exist or act in such a way that we appear to be in support of false teaching.

Instead, we draw the lines of church fellowship based on agreement in true, Scriptural teaching. Far from encouraging us to agree to disagree, Article VII defines the whole body of doctrine as the necessary condition for church fellowship to exist.<sup>40</sup> If we firmly believe this, then we will not be hesitant about practicing church fellowship, unpopular as that may be in our societal climate.

It is valuable to consider the doctrinal content of each article of the Augsburg Confession. We need to be reminded that these are not truths that are kept locked away or recorded in a book that collects dust, but

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<sup>35</sup> Sasse, Hermann. *Letters to Lutheran Pastors, Volume 2*. Matthew Harrison, ed. Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2014, p. 33. Sasse continues: “The hierarch, who is potentially present in every pastor, and *Herr Omnes* [“Mr. Everyman”], who is to be found in the best Christian congregation, cannot gain the upper hand where Luther’s doctrine of the means of grace is still taken seriously.”

<sup>36</sup> AC V, 2

<sup>37</sup> AC V, 3

<sup>38</sup> AC VII, 1

<sup>39</sup> AC VII, 2

<sup>40</sup> Notice what is being contrasted: Doctrine is being contrasted with externals. We don’t all have to share the same rites or traditions. Our Ukrainian Lutheran brothers can use the Eastern Rite. But we must have the same Gospel and the same understanding of the sacraments.

these are truths that are to be confessed and lived. After all, those who presented the Augsburg Confession presented what was actually being taught and preached in their churches.<sup>41</sup>

## THE IMPACT OF THE AUGSBURG CONFESSION

If one considers the impact of the Augsburg Confession from a political point of view, it would have to be deemed an almost total failure. There are reports that Emperor Charles V fell asleep while the Augsburg Confession was being read.<sup>42</sup> It did not result in the Lutherans gaining a fair hearing for their teaching, or even political legitimacy for the lands where the gospel was being taught. The truce<sup>43</sup> that was negotiated between Charles V and the Lutherans in the aftermath of the Diet of Augsburg was ultimately induced by the pressures of war, not by the brave confession of the German princes. It was not until 1555 and the Peace of Augsburg that those territories which held to the Augsburg Confession were given legal standing in the empire.<sup>44</sup>

Even theologically it appears as though the Augsburg Confession has had little impact on our world. While it has ultimately become “the standard of Lutheran doctrine everywhere,”<sup>45</sup> it is shocking to note how quickly the Augsburg Confession was compromised and contradicted even by those who should have most supported it.<sup>46</sup>

In our world today, it appears as though the Augsburg Confession still has little impact. The millions of nominal Lutherans in the world still pale in comparison to over one billion Roman Catholics, not to mention those belonging to all other denominations. The lands in which the Augsburg Confession first took hold are all but spiritually bankrupt. The largest Lutheran church in America has abandoned Scripture and the doctrine of the Augsburg Confession.

It might appear as though there is little to talk about regarding an impact that the Augsburg Confession has made. But if the Augsburg Confession does truly witness to the teaching of Holy Scripture, then its confession has not been without effect. For wherever the truth of Scripture is confessed, there stands a beacon to the unbelieving world and a challenge to every other church, asking, “What is the true teaching of Scripture?”

This is why we need confessions such as the Augsburg Confession. While we might wistfully imagine what it would be like if we could simply call ourselves a “Bible-believing church” or some equivalent, we cannot

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<sup>41</sup> AC Preface, 8

<sup>42</sup> Arand, p. 105: “So they asked Elector John’s vice-chancellor, Christian Beyer, known for his stentorian voice, to read the confession aloud. He did so with such volume that the crowds gathered at the windows heard the whole thing. But it was not enough to bother Charles V. Seated prominently at the center of the room, as Beyer read, his imperial majesty slumped forward, head bobbing, sound asleep.”

<sup>43</sup> The Peace of Nuremberg, negotiated in 1532.

<sup>44</sup> This was the famous *cuius regio, eius religio* (“whose realm, his religion”) basis for peace.

<sup>45</sup> Engelbrecht, Edward A., ed. *The Church from Age to Age*. Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2011, p. 448. Historically, the Augsburg Confession has been the confession of Lutherans throughout the world, unlike the Formula of Concord, which was never formally adopted in the Scandinavian countries because they were not involved in the doctrinal controversies that led to its writing. One can be a Confessional Lutheran without subscribing to the Formula of Concord, but one cannot be a Lutheran if one denies or contradicts the teaching of the Formula of Concord.

<sup>46</sup> Melancthon himself was the chief offender, causing us to have to more accurately define the confession to which we subscribe as the Unaltered Augsburg Confession (UAC) as opposed to Melancthon’s *Variata*.

forget that every church claims to gather around Scripture. We must, therefore, make certain that we gather around Scripture that is correctly understood and preached and taught.<sup>47</sup> “For us fidelity to the Confession means nothing else than to be true to the Word of God.”<sup>48</sup>

To be clear, a confession such as the Augsburg is not a replacement for Scripture. It is not a secondary source of doctrine. Its role is as a witness to how we are to correctly understand the doctrine of Scripture.<sup>49</sup> The confession gives voice to the proper understanding of Scripture, expressing the “great consensus of faith, teaching, and confession which unites the church of all times.”<sup>50</sup>

As such, the Augsburg Confession is not infallible, but we do ascribe to it a certain “correctness which can be effectively challenged only by the proof that Scripture has been falsely interpreted.”<sup>51</sup> Because we believe that the doctrinal truths of the Augsburg Confession have this “correctness,” we subscribe to the Augsburg Confession *quia* (because) and not *quatenus* (insofar as) it is a true and correct exposition of Holy Scripture.<sup>52</sup>

But if the Augsburg Confession is to serve in its role as a witness to Scripture, we need to make certain not only that we subscribe to it but that we actually know what it says. Studying and reading the Augsburg Confession would be of great benefit to every one of us. We cannot allow the Augsburg Confession to be nothing more than a collection of unassailable doctrinal truths to which we subscribe but then rarely think about. Rather, the Augsburg Confession should be the document which drives us deeper into Scripture<sup>53</sup> and which teaches us how to publicly confess our faith.

In other words, if the Augsburg Confession is to impact us, it must become our confession. We must read and study it. We must know its content. We must pray that God would work faith in our hearts, too, that this confession of the truth of his Word would be ours and that we will not, even inadvertently, compromise it. We must preach it and teach it and pass it on to our children in order that it may become their confession, too.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Sasse, Vol 1, p. 26.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>49</sup> The terms we use to describe this relation are as follows: Scripture is our *norma normans*, (“norming norm” or “ruling rule” or “the standard that sets the standards”) the only standard for truth. The Lutheran Confessions are *norma normata*, (“norm that is normed” or “standard which is set by the standard”) the content of which is determined by Scripture. Herman Sasse has a good reminder that “it is only the *norma normata* of the confessions which shows due respect to the *norma normans* of Holy Scripture...The entire experience of modern church history shows that as soon as the authority of the confessions as the true interpretation of Scripture is weakened, the *norma normans* of the Holy Scriptures is also overthrown. Therefore in the Lutheran Church the authority of the confessions is nothing else than the authority of the Holy Scripture which is *sui ipsius interpret* [its own interpreter].” Sasse, Vol 1, pp. 30-31.

<sup>50</sup> Sasse, Vol 2, p. 15.

<sup>51</sup> Sasse, Vol 1, p. 29.

<sup>52</sup> One can, of course, subscribe to anything at all “insofar as” it is a correct exposition of Holy Scripture.

<sup>53</sup> Franzmann, Martin H. *New Courage for Daily Living*. Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1963, p. 69.

<sup>54</sup> Sasse, Vol 2, p. 15, specifically mentions the Lutheran schools established in America as prime institutions for the transmission of Confessional Lutheranism: “The old Lutheran connection of church and school (cf. the constant placing together of “our churches and schools” in the Preface of the Book of Concord) has here again come to life in completely modern form. No Lutheran Church in modern times has labored so systematically and consciously for the preservation of the purity of the doctrine of the church and for its transmission to the coming generations.”

If we succeed in that task, then the impact that the Augsburg Confession will have on us will be twofold. First, it will give us conviction to confess, as we recall that giving a confession to those here on this earth is not far removed from giving a confession before the throne of God himself. Jesus told us that those who confess him here on this earth, he will also confess before his Father in heaven (Matthew 10:32). Whenever we speak the truth, we must do it with the same conviction that the first confessors of the Augsburg Confession had, which is that this is the confession we are prepared to die for, the confession that we are prepared to give to God when we stand before his judgment seat.

Second, our confession will unite us to the true Church of all times. There is great comfort in knowing that we are not sectarian, but that the church of the Augsburg Confession stands with all Christians of all time in expressing the one truth of Christ's one Church.

When that is the case, then the Augsburg Confession will also have great impact as we minister to all people.

There are the truly unchurched, those who have no background in Christianity and very little knowledge of even the most basic Scriptural truths. The Augsburg Confession can impact our ministry to these people in a very large way.

After all, the outline of the Augsburg Confession spells out the basic articles of faith. One could do worse than to shape a Bible Information Class around the articles of the Augsburg Confession. But the impact the Augsburg Confession should make on our ministry to these people is more than just in organization of our teaching.

Those who are truly unchurched would greatly benefit from understanding that we are not promoting Lutheranism for Lutheranism's sake, but that our confession of the faith is what joins us to the "great consensus"<sup>55</sup> of the whole Church of every age. We are not simply one stream among many, but we hold to the truth handed down to the saints once for all.

That is a powerful testimony to those who have not grown up with an understanding of Christianity. It demonstrates that our faith has intellectual depth and historical backing. Neither of those should be undersold in our day and age. One can do great harm if one promulgates the view that a Christian has his head in the sand, oblivious to anything that is going on, willingly blinding himself to anything that threatens his faith.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Holy Scripture, rightly understood and confessed, is not without intellectual depth. It can withstand any attack, not merely by ignoring the attack (that day has long past for the Christian churches in America), but by returning to God's Word and taking a stand on it. After all, our faith has substance. The Augsburg Confession gives a good frame to that substance and teaches us to confess it confidently. As we do so, it will be very attractive to the truly unchurched.

Along with the truly unchurched, we might also consider those who are drawn to megachurches, American Evangelicalism, and the default American religion, succinctly described as "moralistic-therapeutic deism."<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>56</sup> Such is the definition offered by Christian Smith, based on his surveys of American teenagers described in Smith, Christian. *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005.

How might the Augsburg Confession impact our ministry to these people? Many of them readily see through superficiality and commercialism in the church. Many of them are looking for something deeper. They are looking for the kind of substance of faith that we have. The Augsburg Confession, giving witness to Scripture's teaching of the means of grace, gives a resounding, substantial answer to those who are left spiritually dry by their churches which fail to deliver God's Word. As we build our congregational life around Word and sacrament, those of Reformed background will find the great beauty of a God who works through means to create and strengthen faith, who is objectively present with his forgiving grace outside the realm of subjective human experience.

Many of them are also drawn to the historical nature of our faith. It is sad to see the exodus of those who leave the megachurches only to turn to Rome or Eastern Orthodoxy, satisfying their desire for authority in tradition instead of in Scripture. Would it not be better if, by our bold confession, they saw the beauty of the one holy Christian Church as it confesses the truth of Scripture, not to mention the authority of *sola Scriptura*? Might that be a way in which the Augsburg Confession would impact our ministry to them?

As we rub shoulders with Roman Catholics, the Augsburg Confession can still have an impact, too. A church which accurately confesses the chief article of the faith, justification by faith alone, is a church that frees people from guilt. A church which is constantly going back to the Scriptures, studying them, and teaching only the doctrine that Scripture itself teaches, will show others that tradition is an unreliable source for doctrine, and that certainty is found not in an infallible interpreter of Scripture but in the authority of Scripture itself.

Finally, as we interact with other Lutherans, the Augsburg Confession ought to be the starting point for our discussion. No compromise on doctrine is possible, according to Augsburg Confession Article VII. But where there is agreement in all the doctrine of the Gospel and in the administration of the sacraments, there unity and fellowship is possible.

Might it not be refreshing for those who have watched their Lutheran churches slowly drift away from Scripture to find us, boldly and vigorously confessing the faith that they have all but given up for lost?

This is just a brief sketch of the way that the Augsburg Confession ought to impact our faith and our ministry. May God grant us the boldness and the courage to be true confessors of the faith handed down to the saints once for all.

## **CONCLUSION**

Is the Augsburg Confession the charter of the Lutheran church, or is it a true confession that belongs to the whole Church? In reality, it is both. We are Lutheran not for the sake of being Lutheran, but because we have found in the Lutheran confession the truth of God's Word.

More than ever, what our world needs is a Lutheran church that knows it is Lutheran. It needs a church that is committed to a bold, vigorous confession of doctrine. It needs us to take a stand no less daring than the stand that those German princes took on June 25, 1530. It needs us to take the kind of stand where we prefer to speak the truth than to save our own skin.

For then we will serve as a witness to all in our world that Christ's Church has not disappeared, that still even here in America there are those who are committed to Scripture and to a living confession of the living Lord Jesus Christ.

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