

A Brief Introduction
to the
Lutheran Confessions

A Bible Study Course for Adults

by

Robert J. Koester

Student Lessons

- Lesson One—The Three Ecumenical Creeds: “The Ancient Church’s Confession”
- Lesson Two—The Small and Large Catechisms: “The People’s Confession”
- Lesson Three—The Augsburg Confession and the Apology: “The Princes’ Confession”
- Lesson Four—The Smalcald Articles: “Luther’s Confession”
- Lesson Five—The Formula of Concord, Part One: “The Theologians’ Confession”

Scripture is taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

All quotations from the confessions, where noted as Kolb and Wengert, are from *The Book of Concord* edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, © 2000 Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN. Used by permission of Augsburg Fortress Publishers. All rights reserved.

Northwestern Publishing House
1250 N. 113th St., Milwaukee, WI 53226-3284
www.nph.net
© 2009 by Northwestern Publishing House
Published 2009

Lesson One

The Three Ecumenical Creeds: “The Ancient Church’s Confession”

Introduction: What Are the Lutheran Confessions?

Anyone who has attended the installation of a pastor or teacher in a confessional Lutheran church has heard the officiant ask the person being installed several questions. Among them are “Do you confess the Holy Scriptures to be the inspired Word of God?” and “Do you hold to the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran church and believe they are a correct exposition of Scripture?” Then the officiant reads off the list of the Lutheran Confessions. Unless you have received the formal training of a pastor or teacher, you may be left scratching your head. What are those documents? Some will be familiar, like Luther’s Small Catechism. But others carry strange names from days long past. This short introduction to the Lutheran Confessions will help you understand the documents that make up the Lutheran Confessions.

For Discussion

1. What does the word *confession* bring to mind?
2. How do you imagine that the Lutheran Confessions were written?
3. Who do you think wrote the Lutheran Confessions?

The Place of a Confession in a Christian’s Life

Some churches are nonconfessional. That doesn’t mean they don’t have specific beliefs. It simply means that they do not have a formal written confession that states their beliefs. They might say, “The Bible is my confession.”

Other churches believe it is helpful to have their beliefs written down. They see their confession as an accurate statement of what the Holy Scriptures teach. The Bible was inspired by God. It communicates to us directly what God wants us to know and believe. It is the foundation on which all personal beliefs and formal confessions are based.

Confessions guide our faith, but only because they teach what Scripture teaches. A pastor or teacher in a confessional Lutheran church has studied the Lutheran Confessions and

agrees that they do, in fact, teach what the Bible teaches. When you hear pastors and teachers confess this at an installation service, you can be sure that they will teach what the Lutheran church has taught since the days of the Reformation. You can be confident because they believe the Lutheran Confessions are a correct exposition of Scripture.

They do not say that they believe the confessions *to the extent* that they agree with Scripture. They teach the Lutheran Confessions *because* they agree with Scripture. This is an important distinction. People who accept a confession *to the extent* it agrees with Scripture are saying that they have found Scripture and the confession to be at odds on one or more points and reserve the right to teach what they believe to be true. Those who believe that the Lutheran Confessions differ from Scripture should be honest with themselves and their church and not accept a call to teach something they believe to be wrong. They should teach the Lutheran Confessions because they believe them to be in accord with Scripture.

For Discussion

1. Which is more reliable, the Bible or the Lutheran Confessions?
2. People sometimes refer to the Bible as a *guide that guides* and refer to the confessions as a *guide that is guided*. What valuable distinction does that bring out? How does it keep the Lutheran Confessions from being thought of as not important for a Lutheran?
3. How would you feel if your pastor or teacher said he would teach the Lutheran Confessions to the extent they agree with Scripture?

The First Confession: The Three Ecumenical Creeds

Many of the churches that broke away from the Catholic Church believed they had to jettison everything associated with that church. That included teachings, forms of worship, pastoral vestments, prayers, and ancient confessions, even if there was nothing wrong with them.

The Lutheran church believed that it was free to retain whatever ancient forms and practices were true to God's Word. That is why the Lutheran worship service contains elements that are in the Roman Catholic service. The elements the Lutheran church retained were evaluated from the standpoint of Scripture and shown to be good forms that often traced their history back to the ancient church. The confessional Lutheran church at the time of the Reformation did not consider itself to be a new church body, but a church body that retained and, in many cases, returned to what the ancient church had taught.

Lutherans added the three ancient creeds of Christendom to their distinctly Lutheran Confessions to make that point. The Lutheran church confessed nothing other than what the early church confessed, as is shown from its agreement with the three ancient creeds.

For Discussion

1. Are you familiar with the three creeds? When have you used them in a church service?
2. If there is time, look at the structures of the three creeds.

The Apostles' Creed

From the very early days of the Christian church, Christian writers referred to a “statement of faith” used by Christians throughout the world. This statement of faith is what Christians would confess at their baptism. Nothing is known about the exact wording of this confession. It seems to have been shaped around the baptismal formula in Matthew 28:19: “. . . baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Christians confessed that they believed in the three persons of the Trinity and then stated what they believed about each person.

The earliest creed is called the Apostles' Creed. While it is possible that the apostles wrote a formal confession, it's more likely that the early church gradually developed a statement of the apostles' teaching. It likely shared a common structure but had different wording from place to place. The early church father Irenaeus, whose teacher was Polycarp, a student of the apostle John, stated the Christian confession using the basic form of our Apostles' Creed.

Some time later, another church father, Tertullian, stated the Christian faith like this:

For the rule of faith is altogether one, alone (*sola*), immovable, and irreformable, namely, believing in one God omnipotent, the Maker of the world, and in His Son Jesus Christ, born of the Virgin Mary, crucified under Pontius Pilate, raised from the dead the third day, received into the heavens, sitting now at the right hand of the Father, who shall come to judge the living and the dead, also through the resurrection of the flesh. (Bente, page 11.)

Here we see a confession similar to our Apostles' Creed. In time, it seems as if the various wordings of this statement of faith were compared and made uniform. The first version of the creed as we have it today is found in a sermon written around A.D. 500.

The Nicene Creed

Martin Luther wrote that Satan attacks Jesus and tries to destroy the Christian faith in three ways: He tries to get the church to deny Jesus' human nature, his divine nature, and how he has saved us.

By the fourth century A.D, the teaching of a man named Arius was threatening to completely overrun the Christian church. Arius taught that Jesus was divine, but not true God, equal with the Father. The church met in council at the city of Nicaea in A.D 325 to settle the issue. A church father named Athanasius (died 373) clearly presented the truth of Scripture that Jesus is true God, equal with the Father. Although most of the church leaders in Nicaea

were Arians, the scriptural teaching championed by Athanasius won out. At the Council of Nicaea the church developed the first version of what we call the Nicene Creed.

The Arian controversy continued to rage for the next 50 years. The church called another council in 381, which met at the city of Constantinople. This council settled the Arian controversy and gave the Nicene Creed its final form, which we still use in our worship services.

This creed is very similar to the Apostles' Creed, except that it contains statements by which we can confess our faith that Jesus is true God and true man, as well as confess his death and resurrection for our salvation. Any church that cannot confess this creed falls outside the scope of Christianity.

The Athanasian Creed

This creed bears the name of Athanasius, the champion of Orthodoxy at the Nicene Council, whose teaching (based on Scripture) was confessed by the whole church after the Council of Constantinople. However, he did not write this creed. It is impossible to determine who wrote the creed or exactly when it was written. However, it had an established place in the church's liturgy by the thirteenth century.

This creed expresses Scripture's teaching on the Trinity in no uncertain terms.

For Discussion

1. How are the three creeds the same? How are they different?
2. Sometimes we confess our faith, reciting a creed with our heads bowed, our hands folded, saying the "Amen" as if we were praying. How is a confession different from a prayer? How might that affect how we speak a creed?
3. What modern churches fall outside the scope of Christianity?

Lutherans wanted to make it clear that their confession was not a new confession. It was merely a return to the correct understanding of the ancient church's confession. Accordingly, we can call this portion of the Lutheran Confessions "The Ancient Church's Confession."

For Next Time

1. Read the handout on Luther's Catechisms.
2. Read the thought questions, and write down answers to share with the class.

Home Reading for Lesson Two

The Small and Large Catechisms

The Need for a Basic Instruction Book on the Christian Faith

The Lutheran Reformation began as Martin Luther struggled to cope with his terror over God’s absolute laws and God’s firm and unyielding judgment on all who sin against those laws.

Martin Luther had followed his father’s wish that he become a lawyer. God had other plans and led Luther to become a monk in the Roman Catholic Church, then a priest, and finally a professor at the University of Wittenberg. During those years, Luther struggled with the fact of God’s justice and what that meant for him, a sinner.

In the years before 1517, Luther began to understand God’s love in Christ—that Christianity was not what he had to do to satisfy God, but what God himself had done to satisfy his own demands. Luther began to understand that God’s mercy in Christ was more important than man-made church rules and that repentance coming from the heart was more important than forced obedience stemming from doubt, fear, or even “love” for God.

In 1517, Luther posted 95 theses, or points of debate, on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. His questions aroused others in Germany and throughout Europe to oppose the powerful Catholic Church. Some opposed the church for political reasons, others wanted a moral reformation, others wanted to guard their wealth. Luther, however, only wanted peace with God. He continued to study Scripture to that end. Many looked to Luther for leadership because they wanted to find peace with God also.

Although 1517 is often used as the starting date for the Reformation, at that time Luther had only partially arrived at a full understanding of the gospel that would enable him to accurately evaluate his church, the Catholic Church, and work with it toward a true reformation in doctrine and practice. He continued to study Scripture, and during the next few years he arrived at the truth that God had forgiven the world based on the life, death, and resurrection of his Son, Jesus. Luther came to realize that God’s grace, not the law, was the heart of Christianity. He came to see clearly that church teachings like prayers to the saints, the worship of Mary, the teaching of purgatory and indulgences (certificates purchased to lessen one’s time in purgatory), and many other practices were against the gospel. In 1521 at an imperial meeting in Worms, Luther stood before princes and the emperor and boldly said that he could do nothing else than teach the gospel, even if he had to die for doing so.

Catholic people throughout Germany began realizing the truth of what Luther said. Priests, monks, and nuns began teaching the gospel. Luther wanted to debate, but the church would not let him. He was forced out of the church, and much of Germany followed him. The churches who accepted the gospel came to be called *Lutheran* churches. Luther’s concerns started over his own faith, but he soon found himself leading a movement in which the faith of millions was at stake.

Luther did not stand alone. The Lord saw to it that many powerful princes, who ruled over large sections of Germany, accepted his teaching. These princes protected Luther and looked to him for help in organizing the new Lutheran churches and in teaching the people of their territories.

Lutherans knew the work would be difficult. Years of neglect on the part of Roman Catholic priests had left the people ignorant of basic Bible truths. The priests themselves were largely unprepared to teach the people, understanding only the mechanics of doing the mass, hearing confession, and assigning penance. In 1528, the elector of Saxony, Frederick the Steadfast, decided to send a team of “visitors” into the churches of Saxony to inspect the churches and instruct the pastors on how to serve as true Lutheran shepherds. The visitors were shocked by what they saw. Ignorance was everywhere. Many of the people and priests understood little of the gospel and of Scripture in general. The visitors left instructions behind, but they knew more had to be done.

The Saxon visitation spurred Luther to write two simple books that could be used by parishioners, pastors, and school teachers to learn Christian truth and teach it to their people and children.

The Small and Large Catechisms

Basic instruction books were not unknown in the Catholic Church. These books used the Ten Commandments, the Apostles’ Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer to teach the basic truths of Christianity. This is where Luther began. In a simple way Luther showed how the law and the gospel were the heart of Christianity. He taught how the law teaches us God’s will and that we keep God’s will because we love and respect him. He unfolded the love of God in Christ and explained how Jesus purchased our salvation, which the Holy Spirit gives us through faith. He showed the people how God wants us to pray for things that relate to our salvation and the spread of God’s kingdom in the world. These were the truths a person has to know to be a Christian.

To these three chief parts of the catechism were added two more, a part on Baptism and a part on the Lord’s Supper. Again, the gospel infused these sections. Baptism ceased to be a work we did to be cleansed of prior sins. It became a way by which God joined us with himself and established an ongoing relationship between us and him through which our sins are forgiven every moment of our lives. The Lord’s Supper ceased to be an act performed by a priest as service to God, but it was correctly described as an act God does for us through his Son’s body and blood given and shed for the forgiveness of our sins.

To these five parts was added one more, instruction on confessing one’s sins. This part was expanded to include the meaning of the keys, the right God gave his church to forgive the sins of repentant sinners and not to forgive the sins of impenitent sinners.

Various other items were added to the catechism, including booklets on marriage and Baptism, and a Table of Duties, teaching people in various walks of life how the Lord wants them to live.

The Small and Large Catechisms were written at the same time. They were meant to be used together. The Small Catechism was the basic book. It was meant especially for children, but also for anyone who wanted a simple statement of the Christian faith. The Large Catechism was based on catechism sermons Luther preached in 1528. It was intended to help people teach the Small Catechism to others. The Small Catechism was first published as wall charts, similar to charts teachers use in schools today. The Large Catechism was published in 1529, followed by a book version of the Small Catechism.

The Small and Large Catechisms as Confessional Documents of the Lutheran Church

These catechisms were not written as confessional statements, but as teaching tools. Over the years, they became the basic tools for teaching the Christian faith in Lutheran churches and homes. By the time the confessions were written, millions of clergy and lay members had already acknowledged that this was their faith and that Luther's catechisms agreed with Scripture. The books had found a place in the hearts and lives of the Lutheran people. It was natural to include them in the body of Lutheran Confessions.

For Thought

1. If you wish, bring to class the catechism you used in your confirmation class.
2. What use have you made of your catechism since you were confirmed?

Lesson Two

The Small and Large Catechisms: “The People’s Confession”

Introduction

1. What edition of the catechism did you use in your confirmation class?

2. Have you used it since you were confirmed? If so, how?

3. What are the six chief parts of the Small Catechism?

4. Can you explain the relationship between the first three parts, that is, why the commandments are placed first, the creed second, and the Lord’s Prayer third?

Samples From the Confession

5. Read Luther’s explanation to the Second Article of the Apostles’ Creed. Then answer the question below.

The Small Catechism, The Second Article: What does this mean?

I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord.

He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death.

All this he did that I should be his own, and live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he has risen from death and lives and rules eternally.

This is most certainly true. (*Luther’s Catechism: Revised*, Northwestern Publishing House: 1998, page 5.)

6. List as many ways as you can how Luther taught the gospel in his explanation of the Second Article. Think of these topics:

Who Jesus was

How he came to earth

Why we needed a Savior

What price Jesus paid

The result of Jesus' work

How his work impacts our service to God

Jesus' eternal rule

Read the following sample from the Large Catechism. This is the entire section on the second article and will give you a feel for how the Large Catechism reads (paragraphs 26-33).

The Large Catechism, Explanation to the Second Article

Here we learn to know the Second Person of the Godhead, so that we see what we have from God over and above the temporal goods mentioned before, namely, how he has completely poured forth himself and withheld from us nothing that he has not given us. This article is very rich and broad, but in order to expound it also briefly and in a childlike way, we shall take up one phrase and sum up in that the entire article, namely (as we have said), that we may here learn how we have been redeemed. We shall base this on these words: "In Jesus Christ, our Lord."

If now you are asked, "What do you believe in the Second Article of Jesus Christ?" answer briefly, "I believe that Jesus Christ, true Son of God, has become my Lord."

"But what is it to become Lord?"

"It is this, that he has redeemed me from sin, from the devil, from death and all evil. For before I had no Lord nor King, but was captive under the power of the devil, condemned to death, ensnared in sin and blindness."

When we had been created by God the Father and had received from him all manner of good, the devil came and led us into disobedience, sin, death, and all evil, so that we fell under his wrath and displeasure and were doomed to eternal damnation, as we had merited and deserved. There was no counsel, help, or comfort until this only and eternal Son of God in his unfathomable goodness had compassion upon our misery and wretchedness, and came from heaven to help us. Those tyrants and jailers, then, are all now expelled, and in their place has come Jesus Christ, Lord of life, righteousness, every blessing, and salvation. He has delivered us poor, lost men from the jaws of hell, has won us, made us free, and brought us again into the favor and grace of the Father. He has taken us as his own property under his shelter and protection, that he may govern us by his righteousness, wisdom, power, life, and blessedness.

Let this, then, be the sum of this article that the little word *Lord* signifies simply as much as Redeemer, *i.e.*, he who has brought us from Satan to God, from death to life, from sin to righteousness, and who preserves us in the same. But all the points which follow in order in this article serve no other end than to explain and express this redemption, how and by what it was accomplished, that is, how much it cost him, and what he spent and risked that he might win us and bring us under his dominion, namely, that he became man, was conceived and born without any stain of sin, of the Holy Spirit and of the Virgin Mary, to overcome sin; moreover, that he suffered, died, and was buried to make satisfaction for me and to pay what I owe, not with silver or gold, but with his own precious blood. All this he did to become my Lord, for he did none of these for himself, nor had he any need of it. After that he rose again from the dead, swallowed up and devoured death, and finally ascended into heaven and assumed the government at the Father's right hand, so that the devil and all powers must be subject to him and lie at his feet, until finally, at the last day, he will completely part and separate us from the wicked world, the devil, death, sin, etc.

But to explain all these single points separately belongs not to brief sermons for children, but rather to the ampler sermons that extend throughout the entire year, especially at those times that are appointed for the purpose of treating each article at length—of the birth, sufferings, resurrection, ascension of Christ, etc.

Yes, the entire Gospel which we preach is based on this, that we properly understand this article as that upon which our salvation and all our happiness rest, and which is so rich and comprehensive that we never can learn it fully. (*Luther's Large Catechism: Part 2*, Donald J. Pieper, Northwestern Publishing House: 1998.)

6. According to Luther, how has Jesus Christ become our Lord?

7. Why do we serve him?

Luther's Own Use of the Catechism

Here's how Martin Luther himself used the catechism:

But for myself I say this: I am also a doctor and preacher, yea, as learned and experienced as all those may be who have such presumption and security; yet I do

as a child who is being taught the Catechism, and every morning, and whenever I have time, I read and say, word for word, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the Psalms, etc. And I must still read and study daily, and yet I cannot master it as I wish, but must remain a child and pupil of the Catechism, and am glad so to remain.

. . . Whoever is able to read, let him, in the morning, take a psalm or some other chapter in the Bible and study it for a while. For that is what I do. When I rise in the morning, I pray the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and also a psalm with the children. I do so because I wish to remain familiar with it, and not have it overgrown with mildew, so that I know it. . . . Beware lest you become presumptuous, as though, because you have heard it often, you knew enough of the Catechism. For this knowledge ever desires us to be its students. We shall never finish learning it, since it does not consist in speech, but in life. . . . For I also, D.M., doctor and preacher, am compelled day to day to pray and to recite . . . the Lord's Prayer as children are wont to do. Hence you need not be ashamed; for much fruit will result. (Bente, page 81.)

8. Why did Luther continue to study the catechism?

9. How can we follow Luther's example?

The Blessings God Showered on the Catechisms

Luther never wrote for the theologians, but for the common people. Consequently, the true Reformation in the hearts and lives of the people was accomplished through the catechisms. Notice how Luther speaks of the blessings God showered on the church through the gospel as taught to the people in the catechisms.

Thanks to God, our Gospel has produced much and great good. Formerly no one knew what Gospel was, or what were Christ, Baptism, Confession, Sacrament, faith, spirit, flesh, good works, Ten Commandments, Lord's Prayer, praying, suffering, comfort, civil government, matrimony, parents, children, lords, servant, mistress, maid, devil, angel, world, life, death, sin, right, forgiveness of sins, God, bishop, pastor, Church, a Christian, or the cross. In summary, we knew nothing of what a Christian should know. Everything was obscured and suppressed by the papal donkeys. For in Christian matters they are donkeys, indeed, great, coarse, unlearned donkeys. For I also was one of them and know that in this I am speaking the truth. And all pious hearts who were captive under the Pope, even as I, will bear me out that they would fain have known one of these things, yet were not able or permitted to know it. We knew no better than that the priests and monks alone were everything; on their works we based our hope of salvation and not on Christ. Thanks to God, however, it has now come to pass that man and woman, young and old, know the Catechism, and how to believe, live, pray, suffer, and die; and that is indeed a splendid instruction for consciences, teaching them how to be a Christian and to know Christ. (Bente, page 65, revised slightly for readability.)

10. What did Luther consider to be the main blessing of the Reformation?

Although the catechisms were written as teaching tools and not as confessions, they became so ingrained in the hearts and minds of the Lutheran people during the Reformation that, in a sense, they became their confession. Accordingly, we might call this part of the Lutheran Confessions “The People’s Confession.”

For Next Time

1. Read the handout on the Augsburg Confession.
2. Read the thought questions, and write down answers to share with the class.

Home Reading for Lesson Three

The Augsburg Confession and the Apology of the Augsburg Confession

German Kings and Princes

When you open a map showing Germany during the Reformation period, it is like opening a can of worms. First, that's what the map looks like. By this time the nations around Germany were united under single rulers and were relatively free of political divisions and competing territories. Germany, however, was different. It was divided into roughly 30 major territories and hundreds of subterritories, ruled by princes, electors, dukes, margraves, landgraves, counts, and other noblemen. Catholic archbishops controlled some territories. The borders of these territories twisted and turned over the German map. And the borders changed from time to time.

Studying the political history of Germany is also like opening a can of worms. The prospect of studying the interplay between these many territories, the changes of their borders, their growth and decline in power, sends fear into the hearts of even the most dedicated historians.

Germany at this time was part of the remains of the Holy Roman Empire. The Roman Empire, which ruled the world when Jesus was born, underwent many changes over the 1500 years between Jesus' birth and the time of the Reformation. The reality of a world empire had long passed, but the idea was still there, embodied in the German territories, plus Austria, Hungary, and Switzerland. There was still an emperor who ruled over this empire. The emperor lived in Austria, in the city of Prague. He ruled the empire, but he was not like a king in the normal sense of the term, having absolute power over his subjects. He was elected by seven "electors," who were also princes and rulers over their own territories. To some extent the emperor had to cater to their wishes. He had to gain and keep his power by forging political associations with the sovereign territories under his rule. He also called meetings, or diets, of the princes from time to time. It was at one such diet at the city of Worms in 1521 that Luther stood before the emperor and when asked if he would retract his teachings, said, "Here I stand."

The Lord Used the German Kings and Princes

All of this is important if we are to understand the Reformation and the Augsburg Confession. Luther was a professor in the city of Wittenberg, in the territory of Saxony (one of the northern German territories). When Luther began to express his opinions in 1517, and when he became known throughout Europe for his beliefs, the elector of Saxony, who had started the University in Wittenberg where Luther was a professor, could easily have silenced him. In fact, Luther early on offered to leave Wittenberg to spare the elector trouble and embarrassment.

But the Lord was looking out for Luther and for the course of the gospel. The elector of Saxony, Frederick III (elector 1463–1525), came to faith in the gospel. He wanted it for himself and for his people. He supported the Lutheran cause, and his successor, John the Steadfast, initiated the visitation we read about in connection with the Large and Small Catechisms.

The Lord used the strange political situation of the Holy Roman Empire to protect the gospel. The emperor was a staunch Catholic. Under normal conditions, as things happened in most countries, he would simply have attacked Saxony, punished the Saxon rulers, killed Luther, and forcefully stopped this budding church. But he couldn't do that. First, although Saxony was part of his empire, it was still a sovereign state with its own rights. To infringe on those rights would not have been proper and would have angered other princes. Second, the Saxon prince was also an elector and one of the men who would elect the next emperor. The emperor had to remain in his good graces. Third, at this time the emperor needed the military and financial support of all the territories should the Ottoman Turks launch an attack from the east, which they were threatening to do.

But he had to do something. Emperor Charles V felt that Lutheranism threatened to divide the empire. As a Catholic, he owed allegiance to the pope, who was certainly putting pressure on him to deal with the Lutheran problem. Diplomacy was his only option. On January 21, 1530, Emperor Charles V proclaimed a diet to meet at Augsburg

to consider furthermore what might and ought to be done and resolved upon regarding the division and separation in the holy faith and the Christian religion; . . . to allay divisions, to cease hostility, to surrender past errors to our Savior, and to display diligence in hearing, understanding, and considering with love and kindness the opinions and views of everybody, in order to reduce them to one single Christian truth and agreement, to put aside whatever has not been properly explained or done by either party, so that we all may adopt and hold one single and true religion; and may all live in one communion, church, and unity, even as we all live and do battle under one Christ. (Bente, page 15.)

The Augsburg Confession

Electoral John of Saxony (elector 1525–1532) commissioned Melancthon, Luther, and others to prepare a statement of the Lutheran doctrinal position for the meeting at Augsburg. Work began immediately. The confession was not to cover all Lutheran teachings, but only those where the Lutherans and Catholics differed. Because the meeting was to be in Augsburg, Luther could not attend. He had been declared a heretic in 1521 after the Diet at Worms, and that sentence had not been lifted. He could only travel to the edge of Saxon lands and stayed in the Coburg castle while the meeting was going on. Philip Melancthon did much of the writing at Augsburg, where he had to react quickly to Catholic challenges and last-minute changes. Luther, however, was in continual correspondence with Melancthon, encouraging, teaching, and evaluating the progress.

The confession the Lutherans made at Augsburg was the greatest confession ever made in Lutheran history. Because Luther himself could not attend, the other reformers, particularly Melancthon, and most important, the other Lutheran princes throughout Germany, were forced to rise to the occasion. The faith confessed in Augsburg was not merely Luther's faith, but the faith of thousands of Germans and their leaders. Charles V realized this was no small sect, but a large part of Germany who stood firmly on the truth of the gospel and would rather lose their lives than lose their faith. The many princes who signed the confession did so with the possibility that they would lose their lives. However, their confession at Augsburg established the Lutheran church.

Luther was nervous that Melancthon would concede too much to the Catholics. Sadly, Melancthon later on would alter the Augsburg Confession to bring its teaching more in

line with Calvinism. Our Lutheran Confessions include the U.A.C., the “Unaltered Augsburg Confession,” and not Melancthon’s altered version.

Nevertheless, after the meeting at Augsburg, Luther wrote to Melancthon and the other confessors, “You have confessed Christ, offered peace, obeyed the Emperor, endured reproach, been sated with slander, and have not recompensed evil for evil; in sum, you have performed the holy work of God, as becomes saints, in a worthy manner” (Bente, page 21).

After the meeting at Augsburg, the Catholics rebutted the Augsburg Confession with a “Confutation.” Melancthon and the Lutherans replied with the Apology [Defense] of the Augsburg Confession, a longer document, which is also one of the Lutheran Confessions.

For Thought

1. How does the reason for writing the Augsburg Confession differ from that for the catechisms?
2. Have you ever read the Augsburg Confession? It is the confession most easily understood by Lutheran laypeople.

Lesson Three
The Augsburg Confession and the Apology:
“The Princes’ Confession”

Introduction

1. How does the reason for writing the Augsburg Confession differ from the reason for writing the catechisms?
2. The Augsburg Confession is the confession most accessible to Lutheran laypeople. Read the overview below. What topics do you think should be explored in more detail?

The Augsburg Confession is divided into two parts, one entitled “Chief Articles of Faith,” and the other entitled “Discussion of the Areas in Which We Have Corrected Abuses.” The following is a list of the articles in the first part of the confession:

Chief Articles of Faith

- Article 1. About God
- Article 2. About Original Sin
- Article 3. About the Son of God
- Article 4. About Justification
- Article 5. About the Ministry
- Article 6. About New Obedience
- Article 7. About the Church
- Article 8. What the Church Is
- Article 9. About Baptism
- Article 10. About the Lord’s Supper
- Article 11. About Confession
- Article 12. About Repentance
- Article 13. About the Use of the Sacraments
- Article 14. About Church Order
- Article 15. About Church Customs
- Article 16. About Civil Affairs
- Article 17. About Christ’s Return to Judgment
- Article 18. About Free Will

Article 19. About the Cause of Sin

Article 20. About Good Works

Article 21. About Honoring the Saints

For the most part, these articles are short, comprising only a paragraph or two (with the notable exception of Article 20, “About Good Works”). The content of most of the articles is easily seen from their titles.

Discussion of the Areas in Which We Have Corrected Abuses

Article 22. About Both Parts of the Sacrament

Article 23. About the Marriage of Priests

Article 24. About the Mass

Article 25. About Confession

Article 26. On Making Rules About Certain Foods

Article 27. About Monastic Vows

Article 28. About the Power of Bishops

In general, these articles are much longer and explain the points under contention between the Lutherans and Catholics.

3. Lutherans were not the only reformers. Other reformers were leading Christians to rebel against governmental authority. In the list of Lutheran errors, which Eck presented to the emperor at the Diet of Augsburg, Eck accused the Lutherans of rebellion against the government. In other words, he lumped them together with the more radical groups, particularly the Anabaptists. Article 16 was designed to protect the Lutherans against Eck’s wrongful accusations. After reading the sample below, identify what things Christians can do without sinning.

Sample From the Augsburg Confession

For our sample, we have one of the less obvious articles: “Article 16. About Civil Affairs.” Here is the full text of that article:

The Augsburg Confession, Article 16. About Civil Affairs

This is what our churches teach about the police and civil affairs. Properly established government laws and authorities of the land are good works from God. Also, it is proper for Christians to hold government office, to serve as judges, to judge matters on the basis of royal and other existing laws, to hand down just punishments to those who do evil, to fight in just wars, to serve as soldiers, to make legal contracts, to own property, to make an oath when required by government officials, to marry a wife, or to be a bride.

We condemn the Anabaptists who forbid Christians to hold public office.

We condemn also those who do not seek Christian holiness by fearing God and in faith but by avoiding their responsibilities as citizens. For the gospel does not teach an outward and temporary righteousness but an eternal righteousness of the heart. Nor does it destroy the state of the family but very much insists that God has commanded them, and so they must be preserved. It tells us to show our love by respecting these institutions that God has established. Therefore, Christians must obey their own

government officials and laws, except when such command them to sin. Then they must obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29). (*The Unaltered Augsburg Confession*, translated by Glen Thompson, Northwestern Publishing House: 2005.)

4. This article goes far deeper than it might appear on the surface. The reformers knew that if this article was rejected, the gospel itself would be in danger. This article is built on Luther's teaching of the two kingdoms—the kingdom of the authorities of this world and the kingdom of God. Answer the following questions to see the spiritual importance of this article:

What is the tool the worldly authorities use to maintain order?

What is the tool the kingdom of God uses to advance God's rule in people's hearts?

What happens to the gospel when the church rejects the authority of the state and takes the state's authority for itself?

What happens to the gospel when the church attempts to use the power of the state to advance the cause of Christianity?

5. Comment on this statement: "Only when the church and state are kept separate can each do its duty as the Lord intended."
6. From your experience, is there any need for this article today?

The second part of the Augsburg Confession is comprised of articles that deal with practices under dispute. These were the main articles the emperor wanted discussed. In each case the Lutherans rejected Roman Catholic practice for the sake of the gospel.

7. Do you notice any point of contention that is absent from the Augsburg Confession?

The Apology of the Augsburg Confession

The word *apology* here means "defense." It is not a statement expressing sorrow for having done or said something.

The Augsburg Confession was signed by princes and other leaders. The Apology, however, is a document written by Philip Melancthon in response to the Catholic Confutation (their

rebuttal of the Augsburg Confession). In the Apology, Melanchthon concentrates on the chief articles of the Lutheran faith, including these:

God	Political Order
Original Sin	Christ's Return for Judgment
Christ	Free Will
Justification	The Cause of Sin
The Church	Good Works
Baptism	The Invocation of the Saints
The Holy Supper	Concerning Both Kinds in
Confession	the Lord's Supper
Repentance	The Marriage of Priests
The Number and Use of the Sacraments	The Mass
Church Order	Monastic Vows
Human Traditions in the Church	Ecclesiastical Power

Of these articles, the articles on justification and repentance make up almost half of the confession. Here is a sample of Melanchthon's article on justification:

The Apology of the Augsburg Confession, excerpt from the article on Justification

What Is Justifying Faith?

The opponents imagine that faith is nothing more than a knowledge of history, and so they teach that it can coexist with mortal sin. As a result they say nothing about the faith by which (as Paul so often says) we are justified, because those who are accounted righteous before God do not continue living in mortal sin. But the faith that justifies is not only a knowledge of history; it is to assent to the promise of God, in which forgiveness of sins and justification are bestowed freely on account of Christ. To avoid the suspicion that it is merely knowledge, we will add further that to have faith is to desire and to receive the offered promise of the forgiveness of sins and justification.

It is easy to determine the difference between this faith and the righteousness of the law. Faith is that worship which receives the benefits that God offers; the righteousness of the law is that worship which offers God our own merits. God wants to be honored by faith so that we receive from him those things that he promises and offers. . . .

Therefore, whenever we speak about justifying faith, we must understand that these three elements belong together: the promise itself; the fact that the promise is free; and the merits of Christ as the payment and atoning sacrifice. The promise is received by faith; the word "free" excludes our merits and means that the blessing is offered only through mercy; the merits of Christ are the payment because there must be some definite atoning sacrifice for our sins. Scripture contains frequent pleas for mercy, and the holy Fathers often teach that we are saved through mercy. Therefore, every time mercy is mentioned, we must bear in mind that faith is also required, for it receives the promised mercy. Conversely, every time we speak about faith, we want the object [of faith] to be understood as well, namely, the promised mercy. For faith does not justify or save because it is a worthy work in and of itself, but only because it receives the promised mercy. (Kolb and Wengert, pages 128,129.)

8. What is saving faith?

9. How do we honor God the most, by offering him our own acts of service or by receiving his service for us through his Son, Jesus?

10. What do you say to a person who says, “The Lord has blessed me with a strong faith.”

The Apology was signed by the princes at the meeting at Smalcald. They recognized it to be a correct treatment of the Augsburg Confession and a solid rebuttal of the Confutation. Although the Augsburg Confession was written by a theologian, Philip Melancthon, the real force behind it was the princes, whose spiritual backing gave the confession its weight in the eyes of the emperor. Accordingly, we might call this part of the Lutheran Confessions “The Princes’ Confession.”

For Next Time

1. Read the handout on the Smalcald Articles.
2. Read the thought questions, and write down answers to share with the class.

Home Reading for Lesson Four

The Smalcald Articles

Preparing for a General Church Council

Before the Reformation, during times of controversy, the pope had used his right to call church councils to discuss and settle questions of doctrine and practice. Even before the Roman pope had taken over leadership of the church, the early church had met in council seven times in the first thousand years. Following the division of Christianity into Eastern and Western churches, the pope ruled the strong Western church and, from time to time, used his right to call councils. Major worldwide church councils called by the pope since the Reformation include the Council of Trent (1545–1563), the first Vatican Council (1869–1870), and the second Vatican Council (1962–1965).

During the Reformation, the Protestants wondered if the pope would call a council to debate Lutheran teachings. The Catholics' approach to the Lutherans both at the Diet of Worms in 1521 and especially at the Council at Augsburg in 1530 was to put the Lutherans on the witness stand and treat them like criminals in a court of law. While the Lutherans welcomed a council in which they could present their views on Scripture, debate the Catholics as equals, and be judged by impartial authorities on the basis of Scripture, they refused to be put on trial like criminals.

The Council of Augsburg had failed to resolve the issue. The emperor had refused to accept the Augsburg Confession. He had accepted the Confutation but refused to allow the Lutherans to read their defense, the Apology. When the emperor left Augsburg, matters were at a stalemate. The Lutherans were still considered outlaws, and the threat of violence hung over the heads of all who would not return to the Catholic Church.

This is how things remained during the next seven years. Lutherans continued with their work on expanding the Reformation. They also pressed for a fair and just church council where they would be heard. The emperor also wanted a council to heal the empire. In 1536 the pope called a council to meet at Mantua on May 8, 1536.

Although the Lutherans wanted a council, the pope's decree made it difficult. Lutherans were divided on whether they should accept the invitation or not. On one side were Luther and the elector of Saxony, John Frederick (elector 1532–1547), neither of whom trusted the Catholics to hold a fair council. They believed that the Catholic leadership was interested in only one thing—forcing the Lutherans to take back their teachings and return to the Catholic Church. The pope had established no rules for the council. Luther and John Fredrick saw only a repeat of Augsburg.

On the other side were Philip Melancthon and other theologians. They believed that if the Lutherans refused to come to the council, the emperor would interpret it as rebellion and use this as justification for using military power to destroy the Lutheran church.

Both sides had a point. For a council to work, the emperor had to draw up rules that would guarantee a free and impartial meeting.

The Smalcald Articles

With a view to a possible council, the elector commissioned Luther to draw up articles to present the Lutheran faith. In his commission to Luther, the elector asked Luther to write articles that would be

his foundation and opinion from the Holy Scriptures, namely, the articles as hitherto taught, preached, and written by him, and which he is determined to adhere to and abide by at the council, as well as upon his departure from this world and before the judgment of Almighty God, and in which we cannot yield without becoming guilty of treason against God, even though property and life, peace or war, are at stake. (Bente, page 52.)

The elector also told Luther not to include articles on lesser matters, where a Christian in good conscience could yield. At this time Luther was quite sick, and some did not think he would live. Essentially, what the elector was asking for was Luther's "bottom line" confession and in a sense his last will and testament. Luther wrote a clear and sharply worded confession. He wrote in no uncertain terms against the Catholics, the Reformed, and "false brothers" within the Lutheran ranks.

Luther wrote the articles and submitted them to the elector, who accepted them. The elector then called a Lutheran council to meet at the city of Smalcald with the intention of having all the Lutheran princes sign the articles. The purpose of the meeting was that the Smalcald League (the confederation of Lutheran princes and their territories) "get their ducks in a row" should they have to present a united front at an upcoming council. The elector wanted to know if everyone was in agreement.

The princes began meeting in February, 1537. Because of Luther's clear and unambiguous statements, some balked at his articles. Many Lutherans in the southern part of Germany wanted their church to hold a more "open" view of the Lord's Supper, closer to that held by the Reformed church. They did not want to confess that Jesus' body and blood were present in the Lord's Supper. Rather, they wanted to be able to confess a "spiritual" presence. They stalled discussion on the Articles.

Sadly, one of the theologians who was content to let Luther's articles go unsigned was Philip Melancthon himself. Melancthon was Luther's closest coworker and the man who had done such a brilliant job of putting Lutheran teaching down in a clear and systematized form. His work helped people know exactly what Scripture and the Lutheran church teaches. But he would also cause terrible harm to the Lutheran church after Luther's death. Melancthon would become weak in his opposition to the papacy and its power to regulate the outward life of the church, including the Lutheran church. He was also weak in his understanding of the Lord's Supper, wishing to maintain a wording about Christ's body and blood that would be acceptable to the Reformed. He had already moved in that direction by changing some wording in the Augsburg Confession. Although not an issue here, Melancthon also gave human nature a role in conversion, undermining the scriptural teaching of "by grace alone." These weaknesses would create divisions in the Lutheran church after Luther's death and in part make it necessary for the church to adopt another confession, the Formula of Concord.

At the meeting in Smalcald, Luther was quite ill. As in Augsburg, he was not able to attend the sessions. Perhaps that was good. His articles were not adopted simply because of the force of his personality and reputation. In a natural way, his articles were circulated among

the delegates. At the end of the conference, they were submitted for anyone who wished to sign. Many theologians signed the articles, and later many of the secular leaders signed them also.

Melanchthon was asked to write a tract on the power and primacy of the pope. Regardless of how he himself felt about the Catholic Church's power, he wrote the tract in line with Luther's article in the Smalcald Articles on the pope. This tract was attached to the Smalcald Articles and became part of the Lutheran Confessions.

The general council never met, so Luther's articles were not used for the purpose for which they were written. In later years, when the controversies began after Luther's death, the church learned to value this clear confession as a beacon to guide their discussions.

For Thought

1. What place do you think the Smalcald Articles played in the Lutheran Confessions?
2. Why do you think the elector chose Luther to write the articles for the meeting at Smalcald?

Lesson Four

The Smalcald Articles: “Luther’s Confession”

Introduction

1. From what you know so far about Reformation history, why do you think Elector John asked Luther himself to write articles for the anticipated general council?
2. Why did the Reformation need both a pillar of strength, firmness, and resolve, like Luther, as well as a gentle spirited man like Melanchthon?

Samples From the Smalcald Articles

Much of the Smalcald Articles contains material similar to that found in the other confession, but in Luther’s distinct style and tone.

The two things that caused some to balk at the confession were Luther’s words on the papacy and his clear statement on the Lord’s Supper. We will look at these sections as our samples.

Statement on the Papacy

Of all the material in the Lutheran Confessions, this article is the most difficult. It calls for a judgment on a historical office, the papacy. Especially in this ecumenical age, we like to embrace all religious leaders, especially when they stand up for moral principles we agree with. Luther, however, evaluated the papacy in the light of Scripture. Here is his conclusion:

The Smalcald Articles, The Fourth Article

The Pope is not, according to divine law or according to the Word of God, the head of all Christendom (for that belongs to One only, whose name is Jesus Christ). He is only the bishop and pastor of the Church at Rome, and of those who voluntarily or through a human arrangement (that is, a temporal government) have attached themselves to him. They do this, not to be under him as a lord, but to be Christians with him as brothers and comrades, as the ancient councils and the age of St. Cyprian show. But today none of the bishops dare address the Pope as brother, as it was done at that time. They must call him “most gracious lord,” even if they are kings or emperors. We will not, cannot, must not let this bind our consciences. Whoever wants to do this, do it without us.

It follows from this that everything which the Pope has done and undertaken from such false, mischievous, blasphemous, and arrogant power has been and still is pure business and work of the devil (with the exception of the things that pertain to the secular government, where God often permits much good to be done for a people, even through a tyrant and scoundrel). It has all been done for the ruin of the entire holy Christian Church (so far as it is in the devil's power) and for the destruction of the first and chief article concerning the redemption made through Jesus Christ. . . .

This teaching shows forcefully that the Pope is the very Antichrist, who has exalted himself above, and opposed himself against Christ because he will not permit Christians to be saved without his power, which is nothing, and is neither ordained nor commanded by God. This is, properly speaking, to *exalt himself over everything that is called God*, as Paul says in 2 Thessalonians 2:4. Even the Turks or the Tartars, great enemies of Christians as they are, do not do this. They let whoever wants to believe in Christ do so, and take physical tribute and obedience from Christians.

The Pope, however, prohibits this faith, saying that to be saved a person must obey him. This we will not do, even if we must die for this in God's name. This all comes from the fact that the Pope wants to be called the supreme head of the Christian Church by divine right. So he had to make himself equal and superior to Christ. He had to have himself proclaimed the head and then the lord of the Church, and finally of the whole world, and simply God on earth, until he dared to issue commands even to the angels in heaven. And when we distinguish the Pope's teaching from, or measure and hold it against, Holy Scripture, it is found that the Pope's teaching, where it is best, has been taken from the imperial and heathen law and treats of political matters and decisions or rights, as the Decretals show. Furthermore, it teaches about ceremonies concerning churches, garments, food, persons and childish, theatrical and deceptive things without measure. But in all these things nothing at all of Christ, faith, and the commandments of God. Lastly, he is nothing other than the devil himself, because above and against God he urges his falsehoods concerning masses, purgatory, the monastic life, one's own works and divine worship (for this is the very Papacy). He condemns, murders and tortures all Christians who do not exalt and honor these abominations above all things. Therefore, just as little as we can worship the devil himself as Lord and God, we can endure his apostle, the Pope, or Antichrist, in his rule as head or lord. For to lie and to kill, and to destroy body and soul eternally, that is wherein his papal government really consists, as I have very clearly shown in many books. (*The Smalcald Articles*, Geoffrey A. Kieta, Northwestern Publishing House: 2003, pages 25,26.)

3. Compare the papacy to the description of the antichrist found in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-10. (The following questions are taken from the NPH study *The Smalcald Articles* by Rev. Geoffrey Kieta.)

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:3-10.

Whom was Paul talking about?

What kind of work does the antichrist do?

Where does he do his work?

What does he claim?

Read verses 5-10.

What was the antichrist doing in Paul's day?

When he would be revealed, what special works would he do?

Why do you think the Lutheran Confessions call the papacy the antichrist?

Luther's words are harsh. Which pope is he talking about?

The Sacrament of the Altar

The Sacrament of the Altar is the second sample presented. Of all the Reformation teachings, this article caused the most debate among the reformers themselves. It also served as the litmus test to determine those who were with Luther and those who were not.

In 1529, the representatives of the Reformed body of reformers (the Swiss reformers) met with the Lutherans at Marburg. There they compared their teachings. They agreed on every teaching except one, the teaching of the Lord's Supper. Luther said that the bread and wine are, in fact, the body and blood of Christ. The Swiss reformers taught that the bread and wine *represented* Christ's body and blood. The ensuing debate led Luther to say that the Swiss reformers were not of the same spirit as he. They set their reason over Scripture rather than letting Scripture speak for itself. In time, other differences in teaching would emerge between the two parties.

If the Lutherans would compromise on this teaching, the Swiss reformers would be willing to unite with the Lutherans. In a day when unity meant power and safety, some Lutherans were tempted to compromise. Philip Melancthon was one of those tempted to compromise. At the meeting at Smalcald, Luther's uncompromising statement about the Lord's Supper kept the Lutherans from achieving full unity. As you read the article, note the first line.

The Smalcald Articles, Concerning the Sacrament of the Altar

Concerning the Sacrament of the Altar *we teach that the bread and wine in the Supper are the true body and blood of Christ* [italics added]. They are given and received not only by the believers, but also by false Christians.

And we teach that not only one kind is to be given. We do not need that clever position which teaches us that under the one kind [the bread] there is as much as

under both [the wine is the second “kind”], as the sophists and the Council of Constance teach. For even if it were true that there is as much under one as under both, the one form only is still not the entire ordinance and institution established and commanded by Christ. We especially condemn and denounce in God’s name those who not only omit giving both kinds, but also tyrannically prohibit, condemn, and blaspheme giving both kinds as heresy. In this way, they exalt themselves against and above Christ, our Lord and God.

Regarding transubstantiation, we put absolutely no stock in the subtle arguments which teach that bread and wine give up or lose their own natural essence, and that there remains only the appearance and color of bread, but not real bread. For it agrees best with the Scriptures that bread is, and remains, there, as Paul himself calls it in 1 Corinthians 10:16: *The bread that we break*. And in 1 Corinthians 11:28: *Before he eats of the bread*. (*The Smalcald Articles*, page 45.)

4. What did Luther confess over against the Catholic teaching of the Lord’s Supper? Note the two main teachings to which Luther reacted.

5. Was Luther right in condemning the Catholic leaders as he did in the last sentence of the second paragraph?

6. The Lutherans in southern Germany were more willing to compromise on the Lord’s Supper than those in the north. In 1536, a document called the Wittenburg Concord had been draw up as a common confession between the north and the south. That document stated that “the true body and blood of Christ is under the bread and wine.” The Lutherans were willing to unite on the basis of that wording. Why do you think they balked at Luther’s wording in the Smalcald Articles? Do you think Luther was justified in his wording, knowing it would cause problems among the Lutherans?

7. Why did Luther’s words in the first sentence of the first paragraph logically lead to his statement in the second sentence?

The elector asked Luther to write articles for the upcoming council, which never took place. The elector asked Luther for his last will and testament, a confession that contained his position from which he would not budge. Although Luther could have written in a milder way and by so doing achieved a greater unity among the Lutherans, he didn’t. He made a forceful and clear statement of what he knew to be true. Accordingly, we can call this part of the Lutheran Confessions “Luther’s Confession.”

For Next Time

1. Read the handout on the Formula of Concord.
2. Read the thought questions, and write down answers to share with the class.

Home Reading for Lesson Five

The Formula of Concord

After Luther's Death

As long as Luther was alive, “the weight of his personal influence and authority proved to be a veritable bulwark of peace and doctrinal purity against the enemies within as well as without the Church” (Bente, page 93). The enemies of the Lutheran church had always been there, looking for a way to destroy the church. But when “that hero of faith and prayer” was still alive, no one dared attack the Lutherans.

But when Luther died, times of testing and refining began for the Lutheran church. Both religious and secular powers up to now held in check by Luther's influence, now came out into the open. Those who truly supported the gospel would give their all to do so. Those who were openly hostile to the church would use this opportunity to vent their rage against it. Those who were secretly opposed to various Lutheran teachings would soon come out into the open and try to modify the church's confession.

It was the latter that frightened Luther the most. He knew that there would be discord among the Lutheran theologians, particularly on the doctrine of the Lord's Supper. On one occasion, Luther said the following to George Major, one of the men who would later start a controversy dealt with by the Formula of Concord. When Major protested to Luther that he was not addicted to any false doctrine, Luther answered:

It is by your silence and cloaking that you cast suspicion upon yourself. If you believe as you declare in my presence, then speak so also in the church, in public lectures, in sermons, and in private conversations, and strengthen your brethren, and lead the erring back to the right path, and contradict the contumacious spirits; otherwise your confession is sham pure and simple, and worth nothing. Whoever really regards his doctrine, faith, and confession as true, right, and certain cannot remain in the same stall with such as teach, or adhere to, false doctrine; nor can he keep on giving friendly words to Satan and his minions. A teacher who remains silent when errors are taught, and nevertheless pretends to be a true teacher, is worse than an open fanatic and by his hypocrisy does greater damage than a heretic. Nor can he be trusted. He is a wolf and a fox, a hireling and a servant of his belly, and ready to despise and to sacrifice doctrine, Word, faith, Sacrament, churches, and schools. He is either a secret bedfellow of the enemies, or a skeptic and a weathervane, waiting to see whether Christ or the devil will prove victorious; or he has no convictions of his own whatever, and is not worthy to be called a pupil, let alone a teacher; nor does he want to offend anybody, or say a word in favor of Christ, or hurt the devil and the world. (Bente, page 94.)

These ominous words of Luther accurately diagnosed the fear that kept some from confessing the truth they believed in their hearts or from coming out into the open with their false ideas. In the days after Luther's death, a sifting of the Lutheran church would take place. Many would boldly preach and suffer for their faithful confession. Others would come out with their false teachings. Still others would use compromise, in their minds, to protect the gospel.

Four months after Luther died (February 16, 1546), the pope and the emperor entered into an alliance to defeat Germany and force the Lutherans to return to the Catholic Church. The emperor began assembling an army with monetary support from the pope. On July 4, 1546, the pope issued a decree that read:

From the beginning of our Papacy it has always been our concern how to root out the weeds of godless doctrines which the heretics have sowed throughout Germany. . . . Now it has come to pass that, by the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, our dearest son in Christ, Charles, the Roman Emperor, has decided to employ the sword against these enemies of God. And for the protection of religion we intend to promote this pious enterprise with all our own and the Roman Church's possessions. Accordingly, we admonish all Christians to assist in this war with their prayers to God and their alms, in order that the godless heresy may be rooted out and the dissension removed. . . . To each and all who do these things we grant the most complete indulgence and remission of all their sins. (Bente, pages 94,95.)

The result of this was the Smalcald War, in which the emperor and his allies were pitted against the Smalcald League, the Lutheran princes. The emperor won easily, in part due to the apathy or fear of some Lutheran princes, who refused to fight. Elector John Frederick's nephew, Maurice, Duke of Saxony, in order to gain the Saxon electorate for himself, plotted with the emperor to change his loyalty at the last minute. Elector John Frederick was captured and imprisoned. When the emperor threatened to execute him unless Wittenburg surrendered, the city surrendered. Many faithful Lutherans were forced to flee, including Luther's wife, Katie.

The emperor scheduled a meeting at the city of Augsburg to establish laws to regulate Lutheran church affairs until the Catholic Council of Trent, when a permanent set of laws would be written. Because these laws were temporary, they were called an interim. Since it was written in Augsburg, it was called the Augsburg Interim.

The Augsburg Interim

The Augsburg Interim was a compromise document. Some Lutherans felt they had put something over on the Catholics and that the document actually furthered the cause of Lutheranism. True, the pope condemned the interim laws because he wanted the Lutherans to return completely to the Catholic Church. Most Lutherans, however, saw through the document. Although it made some concessions to the Lutherans, the theology of the document was entirely Roman Catholic. Hundreds of pastors and churches refused to adopt it. Many pastors were imprisoned and even put to death for refusing to sign it.

At first, Melancthon spoke against the interim. Yet he failed to offer the church a clear statement against many of the interim's provisions. Confessional Lutherans throughout Germany waited anxiously for Melancthon to sound a clear signal as Luther had done, but Melancthon didn't. Melancthon was considered Luther's successor as leader of the Reformation. The church could handle the threats of the world, but it could not bear with a leader who would not lead them to the truth as Luther had done.

Recall that Maurice, the new leader of Saxony, had betrayed his fellow Lutherans and sided with the emperor during the Smalcald War. Maurice gained the electorship he wanted, but he lost the hearts of his people. They saw him as the traitor he was. Maurice found he could not retain favor with the emperor and with his subjects, so he commissioned the theologians of Wittenburg to write up a new interim document, more favorable to Lutherans. Melancthon led the theologians in writing this new

interim, called the Leipzig Interim because it was adopted in the city of Leipzig. This was at the end of December, 1548, about three years after Luther's death.

The University of Wittenburg had become filled with teachers who were, like Melancthon, unclear on many scriptural doctrines and willing to compromise. Faithful Lutheran teachers, some of whom had been teaching at the University of Wittenburg, gathered in the city of Magdeburg and began to write against Melancthon's ideas. The leader of these theologians was Matthias Flacius, the man who more than anyone else helped keep confessional Lutheranism alive during the next two decades. Two parties developed in Lutheranism: the Philippists, or followers of Philip Melancthon, and the true-Lutherans.

Although the Leipzig Interim was more favorable to Lutheranism than the Augsburg Interim had been, Lutherans throughout Germany saw through this document as they had seen through the other one. In fact, they hated it even more because it had been written by the man who wrote the Augsburg Confession and to whom they had looked as Luther's successor. In Saxony, Maurice realized that his subjects would still not give him their loyalty. He realized the harm he had done, and in a bold stroke he tried to make up for his wrongs. He secretly prepared his army and on April 5, 1552, he attacked the emperor at Innsbruck and defeated him. The resulting treaties of Passau and Augsburg gave the Lutherans religious freedom for the first time in their history. The treaties stated that the religion of the leader of a territory would be the religion of that territory. However, a Catholic territory was to remain Catholic even if its ruler became a Protestant.

The political problems were settled, but Germany was still embroiled in theological controversies and would remain so for 20 years. During that time various princes and theologians tried to bring about peace. No one in the Lutheran church wanted controversy. Both sides made attempts at peace. Finally, several theologians who were not members of either party, led by the great theologian Martin Chemnitz (the "second Martin"), were instrumental in producing a book that upheld the teachings of Luther and the confessional Lutheran church. In 1576, this book, the "Torgau Book," was circulated throughout Germany for input from other pastors and theologians. Their input led to the "Bergan Book," which became the "Thorough Declaration" of the Formula of Concord. Because this document was so long, it was summarized in what was called the "Epitome" of the Formula of Concord.

About two-thirds of the Lutheran churches in Germany signed the Formula of Concord. This document effectively settled the theological controversies that arose after Luther's death and was incorporated into *The Book of Concord* along with the other Lutheran Confessions. The Formula of Concord did not establish new teachings but reaffirmed Lutheran teaching of the Augsburg Confession in the context of the recent controversies. It restored *concord*, or "peace," in the Lutheran church and became the last confession of *The Book of Concord*, 1580, the book in which all the Lutheran Confessions are assembled.

The Book of Concord was adopted by 3 electors, 20 princes, 24 counts, 4 barons, and 35 imperial cities. It was signed by some eight thousand theologians. It took the place of several other books containing the Lutheran Confessions that had been published by various people in the years following Luther's death. These other confessional collections by and large contained the same confessions as *The Book of Concord* (with the exception of the Formula of Concord), although sometimes containing documents that supported some of the errors addressed in the Formula of Concord.

In the next lesson, the class will look at the controversies that were settled by the Formula of Concord and read samples from both the Epitome and the Thorough Declaration.

A person once said that *The Book of Concord* is nothing less than miraculous. It was written in a variety of circumstances and by a number of individuals, yet it is a unified document that presents to the world the truths of Scripture. Never in the history of the Christian church has there ever been a confessional document like that possessed by the Lutheran church.

For Thought

1. What role did the Formula of Concord play in the Lutheran Confessions?
2. A person once said that unless the Lord had raised up another Martin, the first Martin might not be remembered today. What do you think he meant?

Lesson Five
The Formula of Concord, Part One:
“The Theologians’ Confession”

Introduction

1. What is the difference between the Formula of Concord and *The Book of Concord*?
2. The older Luther movie (if you have seen it) ends with the Lutheran people standing in church singing the hymn “A Mighty Fortress.” The ending might imply to some that after Luther’s death, the Lutherans lived happily ever after. Discuss this idea.
3. Does the church that holds to the gospel ever live “happily ever after”? Explain.

The Controversies That Developed After Luther’s Death

The Flacian Controversy, Article I

This controversy went on from 1560 to 1575. A very important member of the true Lutheran party, Matthias Flacius, in his desire to uphold the truth about mankind’s natural inability to do anything good, went too far. He said that our sinful flesh was sin itself. Flacius’ motives were good, but his way of speaking went beyond Scripture.

The Synergistic Controversy, Article II

Philip Melancthon was Luther’s right-hand man. He played a major role in the Reformation. He organized Scripture’s teachings so they could be more easily understood and taught. However, from what he wrote in the 1550 edition of his doctrine book, it became clear that he had departed from Scripture’s teaching. He claimed that three causes work together to bring a person to faith: the Holy Spirit, the voice of the gospel, and “the will of man, which does not resist the divine voice, but somehow with trepidation, assents. . . . God therefore begins and draws by the voice of the gospel, but he draws him who is willing and assists him who assents.”

After Luther’s death, other teachers in the Lutheran church accepted Melancthon’s teachings and helped spread them. The church had to wrestle with this issue. The question is whether or not before conversion we in any way are able to come to faith in the gospel by an act of our free will.

This controversy, settled by Article II, went on from 1555 to 1560.

Sample From the Thorough Declaration

Thorough Declaration of the Formula of Concord, Concerning the Free Will or Human Powers

Because a conflict developed not only between the papists and our theologians but also among some theologians of the Augsburg Confession over the topic of the free will, we want to indicate first of all what this controversy was about.

Because the human being with its free will can be found and analyzed in four distinct, dissimilar conditions, the present question is not how the will functioned as originally created, before the fall, or what powers it exercises in external matters concerning temporal life before its conversion, or what kind of free will human beings will have in spiritual matters after they have been reborn and are being ruled by God’s Spirit, or what kind of free will they will have when they arise from the dead. Instead, the chief question is, purely and simply, what the mind and will of the unregenerated human being are able to do in conversion and rebirth on the basis of their own powers that remain after the fall, when God’s Word is proclaimed and God’s grace is offered to us. Can people prepare themselves for this grace and accept it, giving their “yes” to it? This is the question concerning which some theologians argued for many years in the churches of the Augsburg Confession.

The one party held and taught that although human beings cannot fulfill God’s command on the basis of their own powers and cannot truly trust, fear, and love God without the grace of the Holy Spirit, they certainly retain enough natural powers before rebirth, so that they can in some way prepare themselves to receive grace—even though weakly—and to give their “yes.” However, without the addition of the grace of the Holy Spirit, they could accomplish nothing with these powers but would have to suffer defeat in the battle.

Moreover, the ancient and modern Ravers [or enthusiasts] taught this: that God converts human beings without any created means and tools, that is, through his Spirit apart from the external proclamation and hearing of God’s Word, and that he draws them apart from these means to saving knowledge of Christ.

Against these two parties the pure teachers of the Augsburg Confession have taught and contended that human beings were so corrupted through the fall of our first parents that in spiritual matters concerning our conversion and the salvation of our soul they are by nature blind, and that when God’s Word is preached they do not and cannot understand it. Instead, they regard it as foolishness and cannot use it to bring themselves nearer to God. On the contrary, they are and remain God’s enemy until by his grace alone, without any contribution of their own, they are converted, made believers, reborn, and renewed by the power of the Holy Spirit through the Word as it is preached and heard [1 Cor. 2:4, 12-13]. (Kolb and Wengert, pages 543,544.)

For Discussion

1. What were the positions of the two sides in this controversy?
2. Why do errors in the teaching of “free will” also lead to errors in how we are saved?

The Osiandrian and Stancarian Controversy, Article III

After Luther's death, some theologians in the Lutheran church tried to change the reason why we can be sure of eternal life. Led by a man named Osiander, they told people to look at what God is doing within them, rather than what God did for them in Christ. It is not hard to see why Osiander erred in saying this. It is the way the Catholic Church had been teaching for centuries.

The Majoristic Controversy, Article IV

The church after Luther (and even when he was still alive) struggled to express the relation between faith and works. Sadly many theologians came up with expressions that did not reflect Scripture. Some said "Good works are necessary for salvation." This wrong way of speaking is dealt with in this article. The Scriptural way of speaking is this: "Good works are necessary."

The Antinomian Controversy, Articles V and VI

This controversy also began already during the life of Luther. There were a small number of pastors and university teachers who taught that it was no longer necessary to teach Christians the law. They taught that since Christians are reborn and regenerated, they now have the will of God written on their hearts and no longer need to hear it with their ears. They believed the good news of the gospel would teach them all they needed to know. This teaching also led them to discard the third use of the law (the law as guide). The chief proponent of this false teaching was John Agricola. The Formula of Concord deals with this controversy in two articles.

The Crypto-Calvinistic Controversy, Articles VII and VIII

From a political standpoint, it would have been very advantageous for Lutheran and Reformed churches to merge and take a common stand against the Catholics. At a meeting between the Lutherans and Reformed at Marburg in 1529, it became clear to Luther that such a union was impossible. Although the churches agreed on many points, they did not agree on the Lord's Supper.

In the following years Melancthon began to waver regarding the Lutheran and scriptural understanding of the Lord's Supper. After Luther's death, Reformed teachings about the Lord's Supper wormed their way into many Lutheran schools and churches. The writers of the Formula of Concord added Articles VII and VIII to rid the Lutheran church of these errors.

Concerning Christ's Descent Into Hell, Article IX

This was a local controversy in the city of Hamburg. In 1544, John Aepinus began teaching that Jesus descended into hell to suffer for our sins. What's more, he taught that while Jesus' body was in the grave, his soul went into hell. Aepinus, who presented his views in a dignified way, died in 1553, but there was still considerable disagreement and confusion on this teaching. Article IX tells us not to go beyond Scripture or to speculate in order to satisfy our curiosity, but to say what Scripture says.

The Adiaphoristic Controversy, Article X

During the Reformation period, Lutherans gave up Catholic liturgical practices that were not true to the gospel. They also retained some practices that expressed the gospel. After Luther's death, things became complicated. The Catholic princes defeated the Lutheran princes, and the Catholic Church demanded that Lutherans reestablish Catholic worship

rites in their churches. The Philippists were content to conform to these demands in order to keep the peace. Confessional Lutherans, however, knew there were several issues the Lutheran church had to keep in mind. This article sorts out the issues in this controversy.

Sample From the Epitome

In this case quoting the entire article gives us a look at the pattern of the Epitome. In a very orderly way, the Epitome states the issue under discussion, the points that were being debated, what the Scriptures teach, and which errors the Scriptures condemn.

Concerning Ecclesiastical Practices

Which Are Called Adiaphora or Indifferent Matters

A dispute also occurred among theologians of the Augsburg Confession over ceremonies or ecclesiastical practices that are neither commanded nor forbidden in God's Word but that were introduced in the churches for the sake of good order and decorum.

Status controversiae [The point that was being debated]

On the Chief Controversy regarding This Article

The chief question concerned a situation of persecution, in a case in which confession is necessary, when the enemies of the gospel refuse to come to terms with us: the question was whether, in that situation, in good conscience, certain ceremonies that had been abolished (as in themselves indifferent matters neither commanded nor forbidden by God) could be revived under the pressure and demand of the opponents, and whether compromise with them in such ceremonies and indifferent matters would be proper? The one party said yes, the other said no to this question.

Affirmative Theses

The Proper, True Teaching and Confession concerning This Article

1. To settle this dispute, we unanimously believe, teach, and confess that ceremonies or ecclesiastical practices that are neither commanded nor forbidden in God's Word, but have been established only for good order and decorum, are in and of themselves neither worship ordained by God nor a part of such worship. "In vain do they worship me" with human precepts (Matt. 15[:9]).
2. We believe, teach, and confess that the community of God in every place and at every time has the authority to alter such ceremonies according to its own situation, as may be most useful and edifying for the community of God.
3. Of course, all frivolity and offense must be avoided, and special consideration must be given particularly to those who are weak in faith.
4. We believe, teach, and confess that in a time of persecution, when an unequivocal confession of the faith is demanded of us, we dare not yield to the opponents in such indifferent matters. As the Apostle wrote, "Stand firm in the freedom for which Christ has set us free, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" [Gal. 5:1]. And: "Do not put on the yoke of the others; what partnership is there between light and darkness?" [2 Cor. 6:14]. "So that the truth of the gospel might always remain with you, we did not submit to them even for a moment" [Gal. 2:5]. For in such a situation it is no

longer indifferent matters that are at stake. The truth of the gospel and Christian freedom are at stake. The confirmation of open idolatry, as well as the protection of the weak in faith from offense, is at stake. In such matters we can make no concessions but must offer an unequivocal confession and suffer whatever God sends and permits the enemies of his Word to inflict on us.

5. We also believe, teach, and confess that no church should condemn another because the one has fewer or more external ceremonies not commanded by God than the other has, when otherwise there is unity with the other in teaching and all the articles of faith and in the proper use of the holy sacraments, according to the well-known saying, . . . “Dissimilarity in fasting is not to disrupt unity in faith.”

Negative Theses

False Teaching concerning This Article

Therefore, we reject and condemn as incorrect and contrary to God’s Word:

1. When anyone teaches that human commands and prescriptions in the church are to be regarded in and of themselves as worship ordained by God or a part of it.
2. When anyone imposes such ceremonies, commands, and prescriptions upon the community of God with coercive force as if they were necessary, against its Christian freedom, which it has in external matters.
3. Likewise, when anyone teaches that in a situation of persecution, when public confession is necessary, one may comply or come to terms with the enemies of the holy gospel in these indifferent matters and ceremonies. (Such actions serve to damage God’s truth.)
4. Likewise, when such external ceremonies and indifferent matters are abolished in a way that suggests that the community of God is not free at all times, according to its specific situation, to use one or more of these ceremonies in Christian freedom, as is most beneficial to the church. (Kolb and Wengert, pages 515,516.)

For Discussion

1. What were the two positions taken by the Lutheran church after the Smalcald War?
2. What were the concerns of the confessional Lutherans regarding church customs that were integrated with Catholic theology?

What about church customs that were neutral but were being forced on the Lutheran church?

The Election Controversy, Article XI

When the Formula of Concord was written, there was no controversy over eternal election or predestination. The theologians, however, knew that this teaching would be contested in the future, as it was. Therefore, they added this article.

Concerning Other Factions, Article XII

In the early years of the Reformation, it was easy for the enemies of confessional Lutherans to lump them together with other Protestant movements and teachings. This article clarifies the Lutheran position on several teachings.

Conclusion

In the days after Luther's death, the theologians of the Lutheran church disagreed on various teachings. The Lord worked through some of the finest Lutheran theologians to write this confession that established peace in the Lutheran church. We might call the Formula of Concord "The Theologians' Confession."