

The Creeds of the Church

Session 7—The Theology of the Augsburg Confession

I. Review of Augsburg

- A. The Augsburg Confession was the product of Martin Luther and Philip Melancthon's defense of the teaching of the Lutheran churches at the Diet of Augsburg in 1530.
- B. The Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, had called the Diet (or council) to try to mend the relationship between the Lutherans in Germany and the rest of his Roman Catholic dominions, so that he could present a united front in his imminent battles against the advancing Muslim Turks.
- C. The Lutherans' goal was to show the biblical and patriarchal support for their positions in order to gain religious and political toleration for their practices.
- D. The Roman Catholics wanted Charles' support in stomping out Luther and his followers as heretics.

II. The Structure of the Confession

The Confession of Augsburg is divided into two main parts. In the first part, the Lutherans outline their chief articles of faith and defend themselves against charges (leveled by John Eck) of sympathy with various heretical sects.

Then, to make their positions perfectly clear, they outline the main points of discord between the Lutheran churches and the Roman Catholic churches, phrasing these items as "abuses" that they had "corrected." This language attempts to present the Lutheran churches not as schismatics but as those who wanted to purify or reform the existing church.

III. Points of Note in the Augsburg Confession

From Part One, detailing chief articles of faith:

Our Churches, with common consent, do teach that the decree of the Council of Nicaea concerning the Unity of the Divine Essence and concerning the Three Persons, is true and to be believed without any doubting. (I.I.)

Notice the early reference to the Nicene Creed. The Lutherans were eager to demonstrate that their doctrines were in line with historic, orthodox Christianity. And so on, throughout this Confession, they refer to the ancient creeds, as well as the patriarchs of the church—people like Augustine and Ambrose and others.

They condemn all heresies which have sprung up against this article, as the Manichaeans, who assumed two principles, one Good and the other Evil: also the Valentinians, Arians, Eunomians, Mohammedans, and all such. (I.5.)

They condemn the Pelagians and others who deny that original depravity is sin, and who, to obscure the glory of Christ's merit and benefits, argue that man can be justified before God by his own strength and reason. (II.3.)

These paragraphs will serve as examples of the Lutherans' strategy of demonstrating their orthodoxy as much through their condemnation of ancient heresies as through their adherence to ancient doctrines.

Also they teach that the Word, that is, the Son of God, did assume the human nature in the womb of the blessed Virgin Mary, so that there are two natures, the divine and the human, inseparably enjoined in one Person, one Christ, true God and true man, who was born of the Virgin Mary, truly suffered, was crucified, dead, and buried, that He might reconcile the Father unto us, and be a sacrifice, not only for original guilt, but also for all actual sins of men. He also descended into hell, and truly rose again the third day; afterward He ascended into heaven that He might sit on the right hand of the Father, and forever reign and have dominion over all creatures, and sanctify them that believe in Him, by sending the Holy Ghost into their hearts, to rule, comfort, and quicken them, and to defend them against the devil and the power of sin. The same Christ shall openly come again to judge the quick and the dead, etc., according to the Apostles' Creed.
(III)

Notice the language from the Definition of Chalcedon in the section about the Hypostatic Union of Christ. They also borrow a lot of language right from the Apostles' Creed, thus more firmly rooting their doctrine.

Also they teach that men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works, but 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, who, by His death, has made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God imputes for righteousness in His sight. Rom. 3 and 4.
(IV)

The classic Lutheran emphasis on justification by faith alone makes its appearance here, neither for the first nor the last time. Also, the Confession is notable for its insistence on grounding its doctrine not only in the Creeds and Church Fathers, but in Scripture, both in this article and in many more to come.

Also they teach that one holy Church is to continue forever. The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered. And to the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. Nor is it necessary that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be everywhere alike. As Paul says: "One faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all," etc. Eph. 4:5-6. (VII)

This definition of the church is radical for the time.

Of Baptism they teach that it is necessary to salvation, and that through Baptism is offered the grace of God, and that children are to be baptized who, being offered to God through Baptism are received into God's grace. They condemn the Anabaptists, who reject the baptism of children, and say that children are saved without Baptism. (IX)

NB: We don't agree with everything they confessed at Augsburg!

Of the Supper of the Lord they teach that the Body and Blood of Christ are truly present and are distributed to those who eat the Supper of the Lord; and they reject those that teach otherwise. (X)

The language they use about the Supper of the Lord, or Eucharist, is purposefully vague. Here, they don't say anything that a good Roman Catholic would disagree with. Presumably this is because they feel like there are already enough issues to deal with, and they don't think their view of the Lord's Supper warrants more discussion than necessary. In reality, they didn't believe that the Lord's presence was there in the same way that Catholic doctrine did. Luther's view, that Christ's body and blood were present "under" or "behind" the elements, came to be known as "Consubstantiation" and later became a major point of difference between Luther and Calvin.

Also they teach that at the Consummation of the World Christ will appear for judgment, and will raise up all the dead; He will give to the godly and elect eternal life and everlasting joys, but ungodly men and the devils He will condemn to be tormented without end. They condemn also others who are now spreading certain Jewish opinions, that before the resurrection of the dead the godly shall take possession of the kingdom of the world, the ungodly being everywhere suppressed. (XVII. 1–3, 5.)

Luther's eschatological system was amillennial, like the other Reformers. Here, he clearly rejects any form of Millennialism, or "Chiliasm." This would include what we today think of as both Postmillennialism and Premillennialism.

Of Free Will they teach that man's will has some liberty to choose civil righteousness, and to work things subject to reason. But it has no power, without the Holy Ghost, to work the righteousness of God, that is, spiritual righteousness; since "the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God" (1 Cor. 2:14) but this righteousness is wrought in the heart when the Holy Ghost is received through the Word. These things are said in as many words by Augustine.... (XVIII. 1–4.)

Notice the dual appeal to Scripture and to Augustine.

That our works cannot reconcile God or merit forgiveness of sins, grace, and justification, but that we obtain this only by faith when we believe that we are received into favor for Christ's sake, who alone has been set forth the Mediator and Propitiation, (1 Tim. 2:5), in order that the Father may be reconciled through Him. Whoever, therefore, trusts that by works he merits grace,

despises the merit and grace of Christ, and seeks a way to God without Christ, by human strength, although Christ has said of Himself: I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life (John 14:6). This doctrine concerning faith is everywhere treated by Paul, Eph. 2:8: By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of your selves; it is the gift of God, not of works, etc. And lest anyone should craftily say that a new interpretation of Paul has been devised by us, this entire matter is supported by the testimonies of the Fathers. For Augustine, in many volumes, defends grace and the righteousness of faith, over against the merits of works. And Ambrose, in his De Vocatione Gentium, and elsewhere, teaches to like effect. (XX. 9–14.)

Again, an appeal to both Augustine and Ambrose to show that their interpretation of Scripture is not new but rather very old. They are not revolutionaries, they are historicists.

Of the Worship of Saints they teach that the memory of saints may be set before us, that we may follow their faith and good works, according to our calling, as the Emperor may follow the example of David in making war to drive away the Turk from his country. For both are kings. But the Scripture teaches not the invocation of saints or to ask help of saints, since it sets before us the one Christ as the Mediator, Propitiation, High Priest, and Intercessor. He is to be prayed to, and has promised that He will hear our prayer; and this worship He approves above all, to wit, that in all afflictions He be called upon, (1 John 2:1): If any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, etc. (XXI. 1–4.)

What became another big point of contention between the Lutheran churches and the Roman Catholic churches was the veneration of saints. Later, Protestants would become so zealous to end the practice of venerating saints they would rampage throughout Roman churches, destroying all statues, paintings, stained glass windows, and other things. This movement became known as “iconoclasm.”

Part Two lists seven specific areas in which the Lutheran churches saw themselves as “correcting” abuses which had crept into the Roman church. These seven areas of correction are: **Both Kinds in the Sacrament; The Marriage of Priests; The Mass; Confession; Distinction of Foods; Monastic Vows; Ecclesiastical Power.**

From Part Two, detailing abuses which have been corrected:

Falsely are our churches accused of abolishing the Mass; for the Mass is retained among us and celebrated with the highest reverence. Nearly all the usual ceremonies are also preserved, save that the parts sung in Latin are interspersed here and there with German hymns, which have been added to teach the people. For ceremonies are needed to this end alone that the unlearned be taught...(XXIV.1–4.)

It was incredibly important to Luther that church services be conducted in the language of the people. Otherwise it would be useless to them. That tradition, of never doing anything in church service that isn’t at least translated into English, is an integral part of the Protestant heritage.

Of this kind is the observance of the Lord's Day, Easter, Pentecost, and like holy-days and rites. For those who judge that by the authority of the Church the observance of the Lord's Day

instead of the Sabbath-day was ordained as a thing necessary, do greatly err. Scripture has abrogated the Sabbath-day; for it teaches that, since the Gospel has been revealed, all the ceremonies of Moses can be omitted. And yet, because it was necessary to appoint a certain day, that the people might know when they ought to come together, it appears that the Church designated the Lord's Day for this purpose; and this day seems to have been chosen all the more for this additional reason, that men might have an example of Christian liberty, and might know that the keeping neither of the Sabbath nor of any other day is necessary. (XXVIII. 57–60)

Sunday has no inherent value as a gathering day, beyond the tradition of the church. Christian liberty insists that no day be elevated above any other day. This is an important note for traditionalists who unhesitatingly reject the idea of having church services on Saturday nights or at other times.

For Application:

Of what value is the Augsburg Confession today?

How can we thank God for the events that happened at Augsburg?