

Extracts from **Getting into the Story of Concord: some notes**

Some notes on the Augsburg Confession

In the forefront of the confessional vigor of the 1500s were the Lutherans, who stepped forth with the statement which is still recognized as the first and most important *Protestant* confession, the Augsburg Confession. Though it is a uniquely *Lutheran* confession, other Protestant groups respect it as the first formal declaration of what is recognized as Protestantism. Its ideas and structure have been incorporated in other confessions. To show its continued effectiveness over the past four centuries: Pope Paul VI upon the recommendation of advisers in 1976 was considering recognizing it as a valid expression of Christian truth.

On June 25, 1530, a date still honored by Lutherans, the Augsburg Confession was presented by German princes and other civil officials to Emperor Charles V. The presentation was made at a parliamentary-type gathering at Augsburg, Germany. Such meetings were called diets. This city has lent its name to the chief Lutheran confession. It may either be called the Augsburg Confession or the Augustana, the Latin for Augsburg.

Some notes on the Apology to the Augsburg Confession

Melanchthon's Apology is recognized as a masterpiece of theological scholarship. Here Luther's co-worker demonstrates a full comprehension of the Holy Scriptures and the writings of the early church fathers. Lutherans have always contended that their doctrine has been taken solely from the Bible, and in the Apology Melanchthon could demonstrate how this was done. The Augsburg Confession, intended for a public reading, was too brief for doing this satisfactorily. Melanchthon also took the opportunity to present the Lutheran position as in accord with that of the fathers of the ancient church. As a classicist, he had an appreciation for the antiquities. Now he had an opportunity to put this knowledge to full use.

The Apology is different in several ways from the Augsburg Confession which it seeks to defend. It is about seven times longer. Where the Augsburg Confession frequently makes its point in just a few sentences with only a slight reference to the Bible, if at all, the Apology provides a more elaborate argumentation. Here Melanchthon provides the elaborate exegesis of the Bible and a deep understanding of the church fathers.

Some notes on the Smalcald Articles

Charles V adopted the solution of calling a council, for which the Lutherans had long asked. He met with Pope Clement VII in Bologna to discuss the convening of a widely representative church council. The stated purpose of the council was "the utter extirpation of the poisonous, pestilential Lutheran heresy."

Could the Lutherans participate in a meeting if its purpose was to eradicate their beliefs?

Elector John of Saxony, Luther's own prince, accepted the invitation under protest. The Lutheran reply objected to any council prejudiced by the pope and not general, free, and impartial. After the response was sent off, the elector requested Luther to prepare a statement setting forth the essentials of the Lutheran faith. It was to state doctrinal limitations beyond which the Lutherans would not go. The result of this request is what we know today as the Smalcald Articles, a part of our *Book of Concord*. Points which Melanchthon glossed over in the Augsburg Confession are tackled head on by Luther in these articles. He had reached the point where, confronted by the pope, he would give up nothing.

The articles were presented to the elector on Jan. 3, 1537. The document's ultimate destination was a joint gathering of Lutheran theologians and princes scheduled for the German city of Smalcald on Feb. 8, 1537. Each of the groups were to meet separately. The theologians would concentrate on the doctrinal points to be discussed at the council called by the pope. The princes in a separate session would discuss its political ramifications.

Ultimately, the Smalcald Articles were recognized as the expression of authentic Lutheranism. The Formula of Concord says that they are a correct interpretation of the Augsburg Confession. In the Small Catechism Luther is teacher and in the Large Catechism Luther is the preacher, but in the Smalcald Articles Luther is the confessor.

Some notes on the Small Catechism

Generally the Small Catechism is regarded as something for children, but in Luther's title it is obvious that he intended it first "for pastors and preachers." The preface indicates that they were to use the catechism in the training of the youth after they had first understood it themselves. Soon it became a household item in many families in the Reformation countries, a staple in the devotional life of people. To this day it remains a classical and usable expression of the Christian faith.

The version adopted into the *Book of Concord* has nine parts: I. The Ten Commandments; II. The Creed; III. The Lord's Prayer; IV. The Sacrament of Holy Baptism; V. Confession and Absolution; VI. The Sacrament of the Altar; VII. Morning and Evening Prayers; VIII. Grace at Table; IX. Table of Duties. Its brevity, simplicity, clarity, and winsome approach give this document true theological greatness.

The commandments themselves are taken from the Old Testament books of Exodus and Deuteronomy. These commandments given through Moses are mostly negative. The words "Thou shalt not" are their hallmark. In his explanations Luther adds a positive aspect to them and makes this the most important. Each commandment serves its ultimate function when it cordons off a prohibited part of man's life but when it provides positive instruction for his whole existence.

Basic to Luther's approach in the Small Catechism is his dependence on the Holy Scriptures. For Luther all theology served justification, but equally true for him was that theology had to be drawn from Scripture as the Word of God.

Some notes on the Large Catechism

Luther wrote another document, the Large Catechism, which is not so widely known. Both these catechisms are part of our historic Lutheran Confessions. The Large Catechism is the result of Luther's own reediting of sermons he delivered between December 1528 and March 1529 and follows the outline so familiar to Lutherans in the Small Catechism – Ten Commandments, Apostles' Creed, Lord's Prayer, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper. Luther had deliberate purpose in the organization of his catechisms. The commandments showed man his need; the creed shows him where help was to be found; and the Lord's Prayer showed him how he could ask and then receive the help he needed.

Luther intended that the Large Catechism be used chiefly as sermon material by the clergy, providing sermon material that priests not accustomed to public proclamation and unsure of evangelical doctrine could conveniently and safely use. From the pages of the Large Catechism the reader sees Luther in his double role as preacher and reformer. Here is the voice of a man who has come to the personal conviction that justification is by faith alone, and now that voice speaks with prophetic assurance. A certain unevenness among its sections reflects the ruddy jaggedness of Luther's confessional personality.

Notes on The Formula of Concord

The first 30 years of Lutheranism (1517-46) are the history of Lutheran survival in the face of threats from Roman Catholicism and then Reformed theology. The Lutherans were tempted either to go back to Rome or to go forward to join Zwingli, Calvin, and the Reformed. The second 30 years (1546-77) are the history of how Lutheranism managed to survive in the face of dissensions. Perhaps the threats of the second 30 years were more serious because now the enemies of Lutheranism called themselves "Lutheran" too. After this second struggle there was a restatement of Luther's faith in the Formula of Concord, a document reflecting the struggles among the Lutherans themselves. Its publication was accompanied by a reprinting of all those documents which we know as the historic Lutheran Confessions. After this there was to be no doubt about what it meant to be Lutheran. It meant accepting the Formula of Concord and the other Confessions listed there.