

TEACH THESE THINGS

Essays in Honor of Wallace Schulz

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CONFESSING THE FAITH IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY: FROM MARTIN LUTHER TO THE *AUGSBURG CONFESSIO*

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"EVERYONE WHO CONFESSES ME BEFORE MEN, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 10:32). With these words, our Savior obligated us and all believers to bear witness to Him in the face of whatever assaults the devil and the world may bring against us. Over the course of thirty-five years in the office of the holy ministry, Wallace Schulz has exemplified a bold witness of Christian faith from the pulpit, in print, and across the airways, bringing to the world the saving Word of Jesus. This essay will show that by such a faithful witness, our esteemed brother in Christ stands with the first Lutherans. Martin Luther and his immediate followers also in their times combined faithfulness with proclamation for the sake of God's people.¹

Such a witness is not without significance for Lutherans living in the United States at the outset of the twenty-first century. Our Lord first spoke about the necessity of confession in a political and cultural context much different from our own. Nevertheless, even in these times in "tolerant" modern America, Christians must still speak. Increasingly, believers find themselves under pressure to regard outrageous personal behavior as normal and acceptable, to acknowledge the destruction of prenatal human life not only as legal but desirable, and to relativize the Christian religion as just one expression of faith among many others. To all of this, the followers of Jesus must say, No. They must instead affirm the exclusive truth-claims of the Christian religion. Today, faithful Christians must willingly bear the cost of confession when the world would prefer silence.

1 Parts of this essay have been presented in various forums including the 56th Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, San Antonio, Texas, November 17-19, 2004; the South Dakota Pastors' Conference of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, Rapid City, South Dakota, October 2-4, 2006; and the Lutheran Lecture Series-Midwest, Marcus, Iowa, April 28, 2007.

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But these times are hardly the first times that require the courage of confession. In fact, boldly confessing the faith is one of the great themes of church history. If one follows the advice of our Lutheran Confessions to remember the saints “so that our faith may be strengthened when we see what grace they received and how they were sustained by faith” (AC 21.1),² one finds at once powerful examples of Christians who were challenged by their situations but strengthened by the Spirit to act and speak for their Lord in the face of opposition. Obviously, all of them were both saints and sinners; sinners by nature and saints by grace. Thus it is impossible to present their behavior and conduct as normative for anybody. In a certain sense, however, even their failings and failures are exemplary, for they teach a lesson that they themselves were always learning: that “the righteous... shall live by faith” (Romans 1:17). When the righteous live by faith, they live not by the Law and certainly not by providing a perfect witness. Nonetheless, history provides many stirring examples of confessing Christ.

At the heart of Lutheranism is a set of documents illustrating precisely what it has meant to confess Christ at certain critical moments in the history of the Church. Of course, this essay cannot review the history of the entire *Book of Concord*, but it can show what was involved in faithfully confessing Christ in the historical circumstances that produced at least one of the Lutheran Confessions, namely, the *Augsburg Confession* (1530). The history of this foundational document shows just how seriously the first generation of Lutherans took their obligation to confess the faith, and in so doing, they have something to teach the current generation of Lutherans as well.

The Reformation period of the sixteenth century saw an outpouring of confessions of faith.³ These confessions arose first of all from the commitment of evangelicals (a name for all Protestants of the period, used primarily for the first Lutherans) to the Scriptures as the Word of God. This commitment included the

2 All citations of the *Book of Concord* in this essay are from Tappert, but are indicated by reference to the particular confession, article and line, rather than page number. Individual citations are provided in the text, while multiple references are footnoted. For the original languages of the *Book of Concord*, see *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*, 12th ed. (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), hereafter BSLK.

3 See Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss, eds., *Creeds & Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*, 4 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), vol. 2: *Reformation Era*.

conviction that one could both understand and express the contents of the Bible in propositions that were objectively true. This went right back to Martin Luther who, for example, had argued in his debate with Erasmus, the great Renaissance humanist, that Christians rely upon biblical assertions. However, recognizing biblical truth in the sixteenth century was not simply a personal matter. At a time when the notion of a Christian state was commonplace, confessing the truth also became a political decision. So the story of the *Augsburg Confession* shows how the first Lutheran rulers turned the truth-commitments of Martin Luther into a confession of faith for themselves and for their churches.⁴

LUTHER'S COMMITMENT TO PROPOSITIONAL TRUTH

In his well-known response to Erasmus, *The Bondage of the Will*, Martin Luther insisted on propositional truth, derived from the Scriptures, as the basis of the Christian faith. Erasmus, however, in his *Diatribes Concerning Free Will* that preceded Luther's work, had confessed his dislike of "assertions" and his lack of conviction regarding the role of the human will in salvation, other than contending that there must be "a certain power of free choice" in human nature. Instead of wrangling over what was unknowable, since the Scriptures were often obscure, Erasmus recommended concentrating on the "precepts of the good life" that God had willed to make abundantly clear. For Erasmus, ethics were the heart of the Christianity, not dogma.⁵

4 For the role of confessions in defining and creating religious establishments in early modern Europe, see Ernst Walter Zeeden, *Die Entstehung der Konfessionen* (München: R. Oldenbourg, 1965) and Heinz Schilling, "Confessional Europe" in *Handbook of European History 1400-1600*, ed. Thomas A. Brady, Jr., Heiko Oberman, and James D. Tracy, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 2:641-81. For the *Augsburg Confession* and the Lutherans, specifically, see Robert Kolb, *Confessing the Faith* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1991); M. Reu, *The Augsburg Confession: A Collection of Sources with an Historical Introduction* (Chicago: Wartburg Publishing House, 1930); Wilhelm Maurer, *Historical Commentary on the Augsburg Confession* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986); and Hans J. Hillerbrand, ed., *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, 4 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), hereafter cited as *OER*, s.v. "Augsburg Confession."

5 Erasmus, "De Libero Arbitrio," trans. and ed. by E. Gordon Rupp, in *Luther and*

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Luther reacted in horror. “The Holy Spirit is no Skeptic,” he maintained, “and it is not doubts or mere opinions that he has written on our hearts, but assertions more sure and certain than life itself and all experience.” For Luther, it was obvious that to be a Christian was to confess Christ and *his dogmas (dogmatibus eius)*. Citing Romans 10 (“with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation”), Matthew 10 (“everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven”), and 1 Peter 3 (“always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you”), Luther insisted that it is a mark of the Christian to persist in the truth:

Take away assertions and you take away Christianity. Why, the Holy Spirit is given them from heaven, that he may glorify Christ [in them] and confess him even unto death—unless it is not asserting when one dies for one’s confession and assertion.⁶

But how did the Holy Spirit communicate to mankind the propositions upon which one should stake his life? The answer was through the words of the Bible. “I am speaking,” Luther wrote, “about the assertion of those things which have been divinely transmitted to us *in the sacred writings [in sacris literis]* [emphasis mine].” Moreover, when Erasmus expressed his willingness to submit his personal feelings to the authority of the Scriptures and “the decrees of the Church,” Luther responded by asking rhetorically, “What can she [the Church]

Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 37-40. For the original, see Johannes von Walter, ed., *De Libero Arbitrio Diatribe Sive Collatio per Desiderium Erasmus Roterodamum* (Leipzig: A. Deichert, 1910), 3-9. For Erasmus’s religion, see Léon-E. Halkin, *Erasmus: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993), 289-96, and Lewis W. Spitz, *The Religious Renaissance of the German Humanists* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), 197-236. For the debate between Erasmus and Luther, see Harry J. McSorley, *Luther: Right or Wrong?* (New York: Newman Press, 1969). For Luther’s point of view, see especially Robert Kolb, *Bound Choice, Election, and Wittenberg Theological Method: From Martin Luther to the Formula of Concord* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 11-66.

6 AE 33:19-24. For the original, see *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1883), hereafter cited as WA, 18:603.28-31; 605.32-34.

decree that is not decreed in the Scriptures?" The Bible and the Bible alone was for Luther the source of truth upon which the Christian must stand.⁷

Of course, Luther's willingness to stand on the Scriptures included a conviction that one can *understand* the Scriptures in the first place. Erasmus had referred to the "obscurity" of the Bible as a reason for not arguing about doctrine. Erasmus wrote:

There are some things which God has willed that we should contemplate, as we venerate himself, in mystic silence; and, moreover, there are many passages in the sacred volumes about which many commentators have made guesses, but no one has finally cleared up their obscurity: as the distinction between the divine persons, the conjunction of the divine and human nature in Christ, the unforgivable sin.

Besides such doctrinal mysteries, however, Erasmus went on to indicate that the Scriptures were clear about ethics, that is,

"the precepts of the good life.... These truths," he wrote, "must be learned by all, but the rest are more properly committed to God, and it is more religious to worship them, being unknown than to discuss them, being insoluble."⁸

Against Erasmus, Luther insisted upon the fundamental *clarity* of the Bible. While acknowledging that there were many places in the sacred text that were "obscure and abstruse," Luther insisted that, in the wake of the coming of Christ, the essential subject matter of Scripture was plain to all. God's revelation certainly includes things that human beings cannot fully understand (for example, the Trinity, the incarnation, and the unforgivable sin), but that does

7 AE 33:20, 22. WA 18:603.14-15, 604.37-38. The literature on Luther and the Scriptures is enormous. Mark D. Thompson, *A Sure Ground on Which to Stand: The Relation of Authority and Interpretive Method in Luther's Approach to Scripture* (Carlisle, Cumbria, United Kingdom: Paternoster Press, 2004) provides an excellent analysis of Luther's beliefs about the Bible. Good treatments of the topic are also to be found in Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 72-102; Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1999), 187-95; and Eugene F. A. Klug, *From Luther to Chemnitz on Scripture and the Word* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1971), 13-114.

8 Erasmus, 39-40. *De Libero Arbitrio*, 7-8.

not mean that the Scriptures do not teach them clearly. Quite the contrary, the Bible declares them in “the very clearest testimonies [*clarissima testimonia*]” that people reject only because of their spiritual blindness.

Of course, Luther readily acknowledged that the Holy Spirit alone can enlighten the heart of natural man so that he grasps such truths for himself. This Luther called “internal clarity,” and without it, he wrote, “[All men] neither believe in God, nor that they themselves are creatures of God, nor anything else.” But what he also insisted upon against Erasmus was the external clarity of the Word; and in this respect, Luther maintained, “nothing at all is left obscure or ambiguous, but everything there is in the Scriptures has been brought out by the Word into the most definite light, and published to all the world.” In short, one can know and therefore be sure of God’s truth as it is has been revealed in the Bible.⁹

If one can know the truth, one must also confess the truth. Well before his debate with Erasmus, Luther had acted on the basis of such convictions to defy ecclesiastical authorities and then had remained firm in his confession at the Diet of Worms (1521) when the imperial authorities had demanded that he recant. “I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted,” he said, “and my conscience is captive to the Word of God.” From Luther’s perspective, popes and councils had erred and contradicted each other, but the Bible was absolutely reliable. He would stake his life on it. Of course, that is precisely what he was doing!¹⁰

THE POLITICAL RAMIFICATIONS OF LUTHER’S CONFESSION OF FAITH

At the conclusion to the Diet of Worms, Emperor Charles V condemned Luther as a “notorious and stiff-necked heretic.” He ordered his subjects to refuse Luther food, drink, lodging and hospitality. No one should give him help or counsel either openly or secretly. Instead, Luther was to be arrested

9 AE 33:24-28. WA 18:606.22; 609.2, 9-10, 12-14.

10 As quoted in Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 3 vols., (Philadelphia and Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985-93) 1:460. Back in his room, Luther told one of his friends that even if he had a thousand heads, he would rather have them all chopped off than recant. See also AE 32:112-13.

and turned over to the imperial authorities for further action, which probably meant being burned at the stake.¹¹ Moreover, such martyrdom was not simply a theoretical possibility. In the Netherlands, two of Luther's early followers, Henri Vos and Jan van Esch, were burned as heretics in 1523. Others would follow.¹²

That Luther escaped such a fate was due largely to the protection provided by the princes of Saxony. Almost from the beginning, therefore, but certainly after the Diet of Worms, the Reformation was a political event as well as a religious movement. Enforcing the emperor's edict against Luther became an issue for the political subdivisions of the empire as soon as Charles promulgated it. In the imperial diets of the 1520s, it was obvious that many princes and cities had no desire to follow through in persecuting the Lutherans.¹³

At the Diet of Speyer in 1526, the imperial Estates agreed that each governing unit would determine its own religious affairs, at least until a church council could meet and settle these issues once and for all. Three years later, however, at a second Diet of Speyer, the emperor's representative prevailed upon a majority of the estates to insist on universal enforcement of the edict. This, in turned, provoked a formal protest from the princes of four territories and the representatives of fourteen imperial cities, a protest that included this Luther-like statement:

Since nothing is safer in preaching or teaching than to cling to the Word of God, and since by the command of God nothing else should be preached... therefore we intend... to abide by this that nothing but the Word of God and the gospel of the Old and New Testaments... should be preached in purity and simplicity and nothing contrary thereto. For he who follows this, the only truth and the right standard of all Christian doctrine and life, cannot err or fail, and he who builds thereon and abides thereby, will stand against all the gates of hell, while all human additions and fictions must crumble and cannot stand in the sight of God.¹⁴

11 Brecht 1:473-74. *OER* s.v. "Persecution." For the text of the edict, see Hans Hillerbrand, ed., *The Reformation: A Narrative History Related by Contemporary Observers and Participants*, reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 95-100.

12 *OER* s.v. "Book of Martyrs." See also Robert Kolb, *For All the Saints: Changing Perceptions of Martyrdom and Sainthood in the Lutheran Reformation* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987), 20-21, 62.

13 For the Reformation and imperial politics, see Franz Lau and Ernst Bizer, *A History of the Reformation in Germany* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1964).

14 For the text of the protest, see J. Michael Reu, *The Augsburg Confession: A Collection*

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With this commitment to the Scripture principle, the protesters refused to subscribe to the imperial decree and undo the Reformation in their territories. Religion had now begun to divide the empire. Confessing the faith had consequences even for temporal rulers.

Furthermore, the decision by princes and magistrates to embrace the cause of Martin Luther in their territories also led to written confessions of faith (or statements of truth) for their churches. Such confessions arose in at least two different contexts. First of all, evangelical rulers needed guidelines for implementing a reformation of religion in their territories. So, for example, when the Elector of Saxony authorized a visitation of the parishes in his realm, he had Philip Melancthon draw up a set of articles to guide the visitors in their investigation. Luther assisted in their drafting and added a preface. Although the articles included many practical matters, they also provided a doctrinal basis for evangelical preaching and teaching. Similarly, a few years later, Luther drew up two catechisms, one for the young and the other for pastors, as instruction manuals in the basics of the Christian religion. Documents like these, therefore, became confessions in the sense of standards or rules of faith for the Lutheran churches.¹⁵

Besides statements like these, which rulers employed primarily for administrative and pedagogical purposes within their territories, the Lutheran rulers also developed doctrinal statements that defined their external relationships in the defense and promulgation of the gospel. After the second Diet of Speyer, for example, when they had every reason to believe that the emperor's next step would be a resort to violence in order to coerce religious unity, the evangelical party took steps to create a defensive alliance against that eventuality. But the Elector of Saxony, supported by others, insisted that

of Sources with an Historical Introduction (Chicago: Wartburg Publishing House, 1930), 487-98. The quotation is on page 495. For the history, see Lewis W. Spitz, *The Renaissance and Reformation Movements*, 2 vols., rev. ed. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1987) 2:353; and Euan Cameron, *The European Reformation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 341-42. Lau and Bizer, 78, suggest that the protest was not an assertion of the rights of private individuals but of individual estates of the empire.

15 The Visitation Articles are in AE 40:269-320 (WA 26:195-240). For the catechisms, see Tappert, 337-461 (BSLK, 499-733). For the story of the visitation and the composition of the catechisms, see Brecht 2:259-80.

the basis for any such alliance must be doctrinal as well as political. There could be no defense of the truth unless they were united in the truth.¹⁶

To that end, therefore, the Elector had Luther and his Wittenberg colleagues draft a statement of faith for consideration by those interested in an evangelical alliance for a meeting held at Schwabach in October of 1529. By this time, however, the Protestant movement was already experiencing severe tensions over the doctrine of the Eucharist, and so the Schwabach Articles were not adopted. Nevertheless, they were an important building block toward the much more important statement of faith prepared for the next imperial diet, Augsburg in 1530.¹⁷

THE AUGSBURG CONFESSION

In spite of what the Protestants had feared, Charles V did not use force against them after the second Diet of Speyer. Instead, he issued an invitation to still another meeting in the hope of creating a basis for united action against the Turkish threat on the eastern frontiers of his empire. Instead of threatening the religious dissidents, he promised to provide “a charitable hearing” to everyone’s opinions about the religious divisions to the end that there might be “a unity in Christian truth.”¹⁸

Nevertheless, conditions were tense when representatives of the empire began to assemble in Augsburg in the spring of 1530. This was particularly evident when the emperor himself arrived, now present personally at a diet for the first time since Worms in 1521. Even before arriving, Charles made it clear that he expected the evangelicals in Augsburg both to stop preaching and to participate with him in the Corpus Christi procession at the time of his arrival. Then, on the evening of his arrival in Augsburg, he personally repeated this twofold demand to five of the evangelical princes. But they refused to comply. As George, Margrave of Brandenburg-

16 Brecht 2:361.

17 WA 30^{III}:81-91. For English text, see Robert Kolb and James A. Nestingen, eds., *Sources and Contexts of the Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2001), 83-87. For the background to their composition, see Brecht 2:327 and Maurer, 4, 8-10.

18 Hillerbrand, *Reformation*, 401-402.

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Ansbach, put it, "Before I let any one take from me the Word of God and ask me to deny my God I will kneel and let them strike off my head."¹⁹ God's truth was more important than currying the favor of the most powerful prince in Christendom.

By the time of the emperor's arrival, Philip Melanchthon was already working on a joint statement of faith to represent the Lutheran cause before the emperor. He did not work alone, but received significant input from others in Augsburg and via correspondence from Luther, who was waiting in his prince's castle at Coburg. When all was ready, seven princes signed the document, along with the representatives of two imperial cities. On the twenty-fifth of June, the chancellor of Electoral Saxony, Christian Beyer, read it aloud in German for all to hear.

When the reading was complete, Chancellor Gregory Brück of Saxony presented two copies to the emperor, one in German and the other in Latin. The Chancellor said, "Most gracious Emperor, this is a confession which, with the grace and help of God, will prevail even against the gates of hell."²⁰ These words are indicative of what the confessors believed they were doing in making their confession, namely, expressing the propositional truth of God's Word and not their own thoughts or opinions. Furthermore, they were expressing the truth that overcomes man's greatest foes: sin, death, and the devil. For them, what was at stake was not abstract theory or unimportant side issues but what it meant to be a Christian. Even today the *Augsburg Confession* presents a powerful description of real Christianity.

While space does not permit a detailed examination the *Augsburg Confession*, three basic themes are evident throughout the twenty-eight separate articles that are instructive for confessing the faith also in a contemporary context. They are: 1) the biblical basis for the truth confessed; 2) the conformity of the confession with the beliefs and practices of the Church through the ages, especially the early Church; and 3) the centrality of justification by faith.

19 As quoted in Reu, 93.

20 As quoted in *Ibid.*, 110.

THE BIBLICAL BASIS FOR THE *AUGSBURG*
CONFESSION

The *Augsburg Confession* is not a dogmatics text, but rather a concise statement of what the Lutherans were teaching in 1530 and a defense of the most significant alterations in the practices of their churches. In many instances, especially those in which they expect their opponents to agree, the confessors do not offer explicit biblical proof. Nonetheless it is clear that they view the Scriptures as the source of all their teachings. They assert this in the preface of their confession:

We offer and present a confession of our pastors' and preachers' teaching and of our own faith, setting forth how and in what manner, *on the basis of the Holy Scriptures*, these things are preached, taught, communicated, and embraced in our lands, principalities, dominions, cities, and territories [emphasis mine] (AC Preface 8).

Similarly, in the conclusion to the first part, Articles on Faith and Doctrine, they maintain that their "teaching is grounded clearly on the Holy Scriptures" (AC Conclusion to Part 1, par. 1); in the conclusion to the entire confession they argue that they "have introduced nothing, either in doctrine or in ceremonies that is contrary to Holy Scripture." Finally, they are "ready to present further information on the basis of the divine Holy Scripture" (AC Conclusion 5, 7).²¹

In some places, they also reject the position of their opponents on the grounds that "it cannot be proved from the Scriptures" or is "contrary to God's command [*ohn Gottes Gebot und Befehl*]." ²²

Such statements also indicate their convictions regarding the nature of the Bible. It is God's Word. Although it is typical of the *Augsburg Confession* to introduce a citation from the epistles by referring to Paul (twenty-one times), citations from the gospels are indicated by "Christ says" (seventeen times). In several places, the confessors refer to biblical statements as "God's

21 Unless otherwise noted, the quotations come from Tappert's translation of the German version of the *Augsburg Confession*, rather than the Latin.

22 AC 21.2 (Invocation of Saints); AC 27.36 (Monastic Vows); AC 28.28, 35, 75 (Ecclesiastical Power).

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command.”²³ The Scriptures are identified with the “Word of God,”²⁴ and in one instance they are equated with the voice of the Holy Spirit.²⁵

Like Luther, his followers at Augsburg accept the Bible as the rule and norm of their faith. They also share Luther’s conviction about the fundamental clarity of the Scriptures. In a few places, the confessors refer to the “clear [*klar*]” teachings of Scripture,²⁶ but even when they do not, they cite specific passages in order to justify teachings and practices as if the meaning of those passages was self-evident. So, for example, in Article 4, concerning justification, they conclude by saying, “For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness, as Paul says in Romans 3[:21-26] and 4[:5]” (AC 4.3). In such cases, there is no discussion of the passages, no citation of commentaries, just a reference and/or quotation. The implication is that anyone who reads what the Bible says will understand it and agree with the confession. The Scriptures are clear.

THE CONFORMITY OF THE *AUGSBURG CONFESSION* WITH THE FAITH OF THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH

Besides the scriptural proof, the *Augsburg Confession* takes care to present its position as that of the “universal Christian Church [*gemeine christliche Kirche*]”²⁷ by regularly citing evidence from the early Church. Clearly the

23 “In the Holy Scriptures God commanded that marriage be held in honor” (AC 23.19). 1 Corinthians 7:2 (AC 27.19) and Matthew 7:15 (AC 28.23) are referred to as “God’s command” [*Gottes Gebot* or *Befehl*; Latin *mandatum Dei*] and John 20:21-23 (AC 28.5-6) as “the command of God.” See also AC 22.2, 10; 27.22-23, 36, 39-40, 49, 58; 28.35, 39.

24 “We should not wish to put our own souls and consciences in grave peril before God by misusing his name or Word, nor should we wish to bequeath to our children and posterity any other teaching than that which agrees with the pure Word of God and Christian truth. Since this teaching is grounded clearly on the Holy Scriptures . . . , we think that our opponents cannot disagree with us in the articles set forth above” (AC Conclusion to Part 1, par. 1). See also AC 23.8, 18; 27.1; 28.35.

25 “Why does the divine Scripture so frequently forbid the making and keeping of human regulations? Why does it call them doctrines of the devil? Is it possible that the Holy Spirit warned against them for nothing?” (AC 28.49).

26 AC 20.11; 23.3; 28.43.

27 AC Conclusion to Part 1, par. 1; Introduction to Part 2, par. 1; 28.72; Conclusion, par. 5.

confessors have no desire to present themselves as innovators. The very first article, devoted to the doctrine of God, begins, "We unanimously hold and teach, in accordance with the decree of the Council of Nicaea," and in another article the Apostles' Creed is referenced. The first article concludes with a list of ancient heresies that it condemns, and this practice is repeated in several other places as well.²⁸ The Fathers are also cited in general²⁹ and in particular: Augustine seven times;³⁰ Ambrose four times;³¹ Chrysostom twice;³² Cyprian twice;³³ and Irenaeus, Jerome, and Gelasius one each.³⁴

In short, the Lutherans maintain that their "teaching is grounded clearly on the Holy Scriptures and is not contrary or opposed to that of the universal Christian church, or even of the Roman church (in so far as the latter's teaching is reflected in the writings of the Fathers)" (AC Conclusion to Part 1, par. 1). The Lutheran faith is not a new faith. It is the one, true faith of the Bible and of all Christians at all times and places.

THE CENTRALITY OF JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH IN THE *AUGSBURG CONFESSION*

What is it that the Holy Scriptures actually teach? What truth is here being confessed? What assertions do the Lutherans make in their statement? Here, too, the confessors are in fundamental agreement with Martin Luther.³⁵ The

28 AC 1.1; 3.6; see also 1.5-6; 2.3; 8.3; 12.9.

29 AC 1.4; Conclusion to Part 1, par. 1; 22.4; 23.10; 24.35; 24.40 (Latin); 25.10; 26.42.

30 AC 18.4; 20.12-13, 26; 26.17; 27.2, 35; 28.28.

31 AC 6.3; 20.14 (Latin); 20.30 (Latin); 24.33 (Latin). According to Tappert's notes, none of these is an authentic text of Ambrose.

32 AC 24.36; 25.11.

33 AC 22.5; 23.25.

34 AC 26.44; 22.6, 7.

35 In the *Smalcald Articles*, Luther identifies justification by grace through faith on account of Christ as "the first and chief article" (*der erste und Hauptartikel*) of the Christian religion (SA 2.1). For the significance of this doctrine in Luther, see my essay, "The Evangelical Character of Martin Luther's Faith," awaiting publication in Kenneth J. Stewart and Michael Haykin, eds., *Continuities in Evangelical History: Conversations with David Bebbington* (Nottingham, United Kingdom: Inter-Varsity Press).

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Augsburg Confession touches on many points, but at its heart is justification by faith in Jesus Christ. This, the confessors maintain, is the “chief article” [*die furnehme Artikel*; Latin *praecipuus locus*] of the Christian religion:

“For the chief article of the Gospel must be maintained, namely, that we obtain the grace of God through faith in Christ without our merits; we do not merit it by services of God instituted by men” (AC 28.52).³⁶

The soteriological thrust of the *Augsburg Confession* is evident in the first few articles of faith and doctrine with which it begins. Immediately after affirming the doctrine of the Trinity (Article 1) but before rehearsing the person of Christ (Article 3), the confessors include a statement about the devastating consequences of original sin in Article 2:

This inborn sickness and hereditary sin is truly sin and condemns to the eternal wrath of God all those who are not born again through Baptism and the Holy Spirit” (AC 2.2).

This prepares the way for the presentation of Christ (Article 3), true God and true man, who entered human history “in order to be a sacrifice not only for original sin but also for all other sins and to propitiate God’s wrath” (AC 3.3).

But how do we appropriate the work of Christ on our behalf? Article 4 gives the answer:

We receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ’s sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us (AC 4.1-2).

Once articulated in the *Augsburg Confession*, justification then functions as the center from which the rest of the doctrinal articles proceed in Part 1 and a principal criterion for evaluating certain practices of the church in Part 2.³⁷ So in Article 5, the confessors indicate how it is that anyone comes

³⁶ See also AC 20.8; 27.48; 28.66.

³⁷ In the *Smalcald Articles*, Luther also uses justification by faith as a criterion for evaluating doctrine and practice (SA 2.2.21; 2.2.25; 2.3.2; 2.4.3). See William R. Russell, *The Schmalkald Articles: Luther’s Theological Testament* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1995), 69-95.

to faith in Jesus (namely, the Holy Spirit's working through the means of grace) and in Article 6, they discuss the consequences of faith for Christian living. Subsequent articles elaborate on these themes and constantly reiterate the meaning and significance of justification. For example, the Church is defined as the "assembly of all *believers*" [*Glaubige*, Latin *credentes*, emphasis mine]" (AC 7.1; 8.1); repentance includes not only sorrow for sin but also "to believe the Gospel and absolution (namely, that sin has been forgiven and grace has been obtained through Christ)" (AC 12.5); and the sacraments are described as "signs and testimonies of God's will toward us, for the purpose of awakening and strengthening our faith" (AC 13.1).

Perhaps the capstone of Part 1 is Article 20 on "Faith and Good Works," in which the confessors summarize what their people are being taught about "faith, which is the chief article in the Christian life." Once again, they insist that salvation comes by faith alone.

"Our works cannot," they insist, "reconcile us with God or obtain grace for us, for this happens only through faith, that is, when we believe that our sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, who alone is the mediator who reconciles the Father."

This is the only teaching that can comfort poor sinners, for "the conscience cannot come to rest and peace through works, but only through faith, that is, when it is assured and knows that for Christ's sake it has a gracious God" (AC 20.8, 9, 15).

However much faith alone justifies, the confessors also insist that faith is never alone. "It is also taught among us that good works should and must be done.... When through faith the Holy Spirit is given, the heart is moved to do good works" (AC 20.27-29). Jesus is the Savior, the Spirit is the Sanctifier, and the believer grasps hold of both by faith.

Besides continually reiterating the doctrine of justification, the confessors at Augsburg also employ it as a criterion for evaluating church customs and ceremonies. This is particularly evident in Part 2 of the *Augsburg Confession*, in which they explain and defend changes in the practices of their churches (for example, communion in both kinds, the marriage of priests, and the abolition of monasticism). However, in Article 15 (Church Usages) in Part 1, they already had laid down this principle: "All ordinances and traditions

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instituted by men for the purpose of propitiating God and earning grace are contrary to the Gospel and the teaching about faith in Christ" (AC 15.3). What the church does as well as what it says must reflect "the chief article." The church must never mislead people about God's grace in Christ.

So, for example, in explaining their changes in the celebration of the Mass, they insist that they have eliminated medieval corruptions that obscured the Gospel ("faith in Christ and true service of God were forgotten") in order to make clear the real purpose of the sacrament: "to awaken our faith and comfort our consciences when we perceive that through the sacrament grace and forgiveness of sin are promised us by Christ" (AC 24.23, 30). Similarly, they criticize fasting and distinction of foods (AC 26.20-21), monastic vows (AC 27.48), and holy days (even Sundays) (AC 28.37, 61-62), from the perspective of justification. "After all," they write, "the chief purpose of all ceremonies is to teach the people what they need to know about Christ" (AC 24.3).

The Lutherans at Augsburg were confessing the truth that saves because it presents the work of Christ on behalf of sinners, which is received through faith. This was not a new truth, but one confessed by the Church through the ages because it was revealed in the Scriptures. Unfortunately, Emperor Charles V did not agree with them, and his final decision at Augsburg was similar to his decision at Worms in 1521. The Lutherans must reverse course or face the consequences.³⁸

As it turned out, the emperor was in no position to use force against them until 1546, after Luther was dead. When he did, two of the original signers of the *Augsburg Confession* ended up in prison, and one of them lost land and his electoral title permanently.³⁹ Nevertheless, Charles V found that it was too late to root out Lutheranism from his German kingdom. Ultimately he abdicated his titles and left it to his brother Ferdinand to negotiate a settlement that permitted the territorial governments of the empire to choose either the Confession of Augsburg or the old religion as the official faith of their lands.⁴⁰ The truth of the gospel, first confessed by Luther at the Diet of Worms and

38 Lau and Bizer, 83, 84-85.

39 *OER*, s.v. "Schmalkald War."

40 *Ibid.*, s.v. "Augsburg, Peace of."

preeminently by his followers at Augsburg, would not be silenced, and in the form of the *Augsburg Confession* it would live on right until the present.

Without exaggeration, therefore, one can say that to be a Lutheran has always meant to confess Jesus on the basis of the Scriptures in the words of the *Augsburg Confession*. What was true in the sixteenth century is still true today. This means that, when people today raise the question, "What is truth?" Lutherans have a number of ways to answer. They can point to the Bible; they can speak about Christ; they can bring God's Word to bear on the issues of our times. I also suggest that Lutherans just might want to consult the first of the great Lutheran creeds from the Reformation period, the *Augsburg Confession*. This is especially true if anyone is looking for something that expresses concisely what will always be at the heart of humanity's concerns, namely, a right relationship with God, one that provides meaning for life here and hope for the life to come. The *Augsburg Confession* fulfills powerfully the God-given mandate to make a bold witness and to confess the Lord Jesus Christ before men.