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The Lutheran Confessions: Luther's Role

Eugene F. A. Klug

Martin Luther has been described as a living confession himself. It is impossible to treat the documents known as the Lutheran Confessions apart from the role the miner's son (Hans Luther's) played in their origin. His massive figure dominates in their creation, as it does in the Reformation itself.

The thought never came to nest in Luther's mind or heart that the doctrine for which he stood was uniquely his own. It belonged to God and, therefore, "must be straight as a plumb line, sure, and without sin."¹ In a sermon on John 7: 9-16 (July 1, 1531) he stated: "It is not my doctrine, not my creation, but God's gift. Dear Lord God, it was not spun out of my head, nor grown in my garden. Nor did it flow out of my spring, nor was it born of me. It is God's gift, not a human discovery."²

Confession of God-given doctrine has characterized the church bearing Luther's name ever since the day he testified heroically before Charles V and the church's prelates at the Diet of Worms. The Lutheran Church has often been criticized, unfairly I believe, by those who emphasize "undogmatic Christianity," deeds instead of creeds. But the church cannot deny its history, nor its creed-bound nature, to speak assertively for God's doctrine, most often with thesis and antithesis. It does so out of love and respect for God's saving gospel through Christ's redeeming work.

Lutheran Churches (synods) in America commonly include a plank in their constitutions tying them to the Lutheran Symbols embraced within the Book of Concord. Some, like The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, commit themselves to the Confessions with unqualified subscription. Others consider some of these Confessions to have historical import, but

¹*Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 volumes, edited by J. Pelikan and H. T. Lehmann (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House and Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955-1986), 41:217. Subsequent references to this work will be abbreviated as *LW*.

²*Dr. Martin Luthers Sämmtliche Schriften*, edited by Johannes Georg Walch (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1880-1910), volume 8, column 27.

they are not primary and binding in the same way as the Augsburg Confession. Nine symbols constitute the Book of Concord and define the Lutheran Church and its theology: the three Ecumenical Creeds (Apostles', Nicene, Athanasian); the unaltered Augsburg Confession; the Apology of the Augsburg Confession; the Smalcald Articles (and Tractate); the Large and Small Catechisms of Luther; and the Formula of Concord. Lutheran churches elsewhere in the world present a similar picture, either strictly confessional or qualifiedly so. Some of them bind themselves to the Book of Concord as an accurate, scriptural exposition of the Christian faith; others see it as a valuable historical document in expression of their faith only.

All nine documents have a connection—some more, some less—with the mind and spirit of Luther. Thomas Carlyle characterized Luther as “great, not as a hewn obelisk, but as an Alpine mountain, so simple, honest, spontaneous, not setting up to be great at all; there for another purpose than being great at all! A right spiritual hero . . . for whom these centuries, and many more to come yet, will be thankful to Heaven.”³ By the time of Luther's death, February 18, 1546, all nine documents were in existence, except for the last, the Formula of Concord, which did not appear until 1577.

One of Luther's early hymns, “We All Believe in One True God,” is a powerful statement on the trinity of persons in the Godhead, witnessing in lyrical form to his unqualified support of the creeds. In gist it anticipated Luther's work on the catechisms.⁴ Luther wrote a specific treatise on the creeds in 1537, “The Three Symbols or Creeds of the Christian Faith,” in which he also spoke warmly of the *Te Deum Laudamus* and its honored place in the church's liturgical tradition.

In a sermon given on Trinity Sunday, 1535, based on Romans 11:33-36, Luther stated trenchantly of the Apostles' Creed: “As the bee collects honey from many fair and beautiful flowers, so is this Creed collected, in appropriate brevity from the books of the beloved prophets and apostles—from the entire Scriptures—for children and unlearned

³Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus: On Heroes, Hero-worship and the Heroic in History* (London, Toronto: J. M. Dent & Sons and New York: E. P. Dutton, 1929), 127.

⁴LW 53:271 and following. The hymn's lyrics date from 1524, but the melody is the version that first appeared in Joseph Klug's hymnal of 1533 at Wittenberg.

Christians. For brevity and clearness it could not have been better arranged, and it has remained in the Church from ancient time."⁵ Luther would have little truck with an age like ours in which Christianity has largely become creedless, even opposed to systematized confessions of faith like the ecumenical creeds. Is it possible that the vapid malaise affecting many churches today results from such misguided, anemic sort of theology?

The second Diet of Speier in 1529 changed things for the Reformation heartland, quite literally cancelling out religious freedom. The next year, Charles V enjoyed friendlier relations with the papacy (he was crowned ceremoniously as emperor by Pope Clement VII at Bologna, February 24, 1530 – the last emperor to be so crowned). Cooperating with the papacy, he summoned the dissident Protestant princes and leaders to a diet to be convened at Augsburg on April 6, 1530. Charles promised to be present in person. His summoning letter to Elector John Frederick of Saxony, his uncle, was somewhat mild, even conciliatory, pledging "to order all things in the German nation and in the Christian religion, in a right and honorable way."⁶ But Elector John was not taken in by the seemingly sweet tones, nor were the other princes and leaders. When Charles and the imperial retinue finally (more than a month late!) rode into town along with the papal legate, Campeggio, Elector John and his Protestant allies greeted them with their presence, but stood bolt upright, refusing to bow ceremoniously to receive the papal blessing.

From the moment of their arrival in Augsburg the Lutheran party had worked feverishly to ready what they called their "Apology" for the faith. With them they brought various materials prepared earlier for various purposes. On their way to Augsburg they had met at the Elector's residence in Torgau. Luther was also present, though he could then proceed no farther than Coburg Castle for safety reasons. A condemned heretic had no rights and even if a safe conduct guarantee could have been obtained for him, Elector John would never have trusted the

⁵J. N. Lenker, editor, *Sermons of Martin Luther: Church Postils* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1995), VIII:33.

⁶For the letter see Theodore E. Schmauk and C. Theodore Benze, *The Confessional Principle and the Confessions of the Lutheran Church, as Embodying the Evangelical Confession of the Christian Church* (Philadelphia: General Council Publication Board, 1911), 286.

imperial and papal authorities to honor it. At Torgau they worked on articles dealing with disputed issues and abuses in the church: the withholding of the cup from the laity; forbidding marriage for the clergy; the offense of the mass as sacrifice; obligatory auricular confession to the priest; required feasts and fasting; irrevocable monastic vows; and the secular power of bishops. These so-called polemical points eventually formed the last seven articles of the Augsburg Confession.

Philip Melancthon, Luther's valued colleague, was the primary writer. He and the other trusted theologians had with them the so-called Schwabach Articles of summer 1529 and the Marburg Articles (colloquy with Zwingli) of autumn 1529. The initial twenty-one articles of the Augsburg Confession, all much more evangelical than the last seven, correspond closely to the above sources. Luther's hand and spirit are in all of them. In a letter Luther wrote to his sovereign, Elector John, from Coburg after he had received a draft of the proposed confession, he assured his prince of two things: first, his pleasure with the document, commenting "I know nothing to improve or change it," and second, the observation "I cannot step so softly and quietly."⁷

Everyone knew that Luther was the actual but absent protagonist at Augsburg, very much involved in the proceedings, especially in what was finally orally read – the booming voice of vice chancellor Christian Beyer was clearly audible in the courtyard of the bishop of Augsburg's residence outside the open windows of the meeting room. The reading was in German, allowing the public easily to understand what was said. A Latin version of the Confession was ready at the same time; both were handed over to Charles V, who immediately delegated the task of response to the papalist theologians in attendance. The Confutation, after many revisions, was ultimately readied and read as theirs and the emperor's answer, but a copy was never shared with the Protestant side. They managed to obtain one anyway plus the notes they had taken at the hearing.

Nothing, however, could match the impression that the Augsburg Confession had made, even on the papalist side. "The Bishop of Augsburg is reported to have said privately that it contained nothing but

⁷LW 49:297-298.

the pure truth."⁸ Even Charles V appeared to listen attentively, though Spanish, not German, was his mother tongue. The report is that he began to nod during the two-hour-long reading in the late afternoon. But, as Philip Schaff notes, his drowsiness must not "be construed as a mark of disrespect to the Lutherans, for he was likewise soundly asleep on the third of August when the Romish Confutation was read before the Diet."⁹ There is no debating the point that the substantive content of the Confession is Luther's, as Schaff notes: "As to the doctrines Luther had a right to say, 'The Catechism, the Exposition of the Ten Commandments, and the *Augsburg Confession*, are mine.'"¹⁰ Besides those mentioned, other sources in Luther's writings to which reference could be made, and undoubtedly was made, at that time are: the Ten Sermons on the Catechism, 1528,¹¹ his so-called "Great Confession" of the same year, specifically Part III;¹² and his very early devotional writings.¹³ The literary composition may have been Melancthon's, but "Luther was the primary author, Melancthon the secondary author, of the contents."¹⁴ This agrees with Charles Porterfield Krauth's assessment that "to a large extent Melancthon's work is but an elaboration of Luther's, and to a large extent it is not an elaboration, but a reproduction."¹⁵

Also significant is the fact that in the period immediately before Augsburg, Luther was involved in several systematic or doctrinal productions, most notably the completion of the catechisms. In April and May 1529, Luther's Large Catechism and Small Catechism were published. The former is still one of the finest summaries of Christian faith and doctrine ever composed and the latter has rightly earned its accolade as "the gem of the Reformation," or "the layman's Bible." Both treat the Bible's chief parts or doctrine with ingenuous, uncomplicated

⁸Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom, with a History and Critical Notes* (New York, London: Harper & Brothers, 1919), I:226.

⁹Schaff, *Creeds*, I:227, note 1.

¹⁰Schaff, *Creeds*, I:229, note 3.

¹¹LW 51:135 and following.

¹²LW 37:360 and following.

¹³One may compare LW 42 and 43.

¹⁴Schaff, *Creeds*, I:229.

¹⁵Charles P. Krauth, *The Conservative Reformation and its Theology* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1871), 219.

clarity, and both were ultimately included in the Book of Concord as official confessions of the Lutheran church.

The catechisms of Luther stand in their own right and light. But the fact is that they are often honored in and because of their connection to the Augsburg Confession. That document marked one of history's great, decisive moments. There undoubtedly is justifiable merit to Krauth's argument in its behalf when he states that "the man of the world should feel a deep interest in a document which bears to the whole cause of freedom as close a relation as the 'Declaration of Independence' does to our own as Americans."¹⁶ The Confession's impact has extended far beyond the borders of the Lutheran Church itself.

Luther had no direct hand in the next document, which has become a standard in Lutheran theology, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession. Melanchthon began working on it while still at Augsburg and continued to do so back in Wittenberg. It was intended as a rebuttal of the Romanists' Confutation and he worked on it at the behest of his prince, Elector John Frederick, who, because of his heroic stance at Augsburg, has gone down in history to be remembered as John the Constant. Charles V had given the Protestant party until April 15, 1531 to accept the terms and the theology of the Confutation. This was totally unacceptable to them and Melanchthon's Apology constituted their theological response. At the same time the Lutheran leaders saw the need for a league to be formed in defense of their territories, should military pressure be brought to bear against them by the emperor.

The Apology has been termed a theological masterpiece. Not only did it decisively rebut the Confutation, but also continues to serve as a genuinely excellent commentary on the Augsburg Confession in Melanchthon's brilliant literary style. It was written in Latin but done into German that same year, 1531, by Melanchthon's colleague, Justus Jonas. The 1531 versions are the officially recognized ones, along with the German and Latin versions of the Augsburg Confession published in that same year. Both found their way into the Book of Concord. Melanchthon, ever the meticulous worker, continued to "fiddle" with both of these important documents in the ensuing years looking for new formulations, even making substantive changes. Luther deplored this indecisiveness

¹⁶Krauth, *Conservative Reformation*, 212-213.

and yet he gave the Apology of 1531 his unqualified support, as he had the Confession itself, urging a group of refugee Lutherans banished from Leipzig to "adhere to our Confession and Apology."¹⁷

While the Confession and the Apology played such decisive roles, it was Luther's Smalcald Articles of 1537 that set papalist and Lutheran theology into sharpest, most discrete, and opposing poles. Luther prepared this document at the request of Elector John Frederick, the son of the heroic John the Constant, now deceased. Pope Paul III had announced a council for May 1537 at Mantua, Italy. The Lutheran princes and theologians were not eager for a meeting on terms that foreclosed open discussion and already condemned them before they were even heard. But they decided that they should be ready with their statement of the issues in case they were required to bear witness. Actually, a council never took place that year, and it was not until 1545, at Trent, that Pope Paul III convened the council.

Not aware that the council would be cancelled, the Lutheran leaders and theologians met in early 1537 at Smalcald. Ostensibly Luther's articles, which had been shared and read by the participants even prior to coming, were to provide the main agenda. Melanchthon gave his approval with some reservations, chiefly misgivings about the sharpness with which Luther addressed the papal tyranny and identified the papacy as the Antichrist. Luther also zeroed in on the abuses spawned by the Mass and monastic theology. In the last part, Part III, he dealt succinctly with fifteen topics or doctrines on which the papalist church had departed from the word of God. When Luther became desperately ill at the very outset of the meeting, Melanchthon was able to maneuver the agenda to a reconsideration of the Confession and the Apology. Luther remained too ill to remonstrate, and the end result was that his articles were not publicly read, though privately they were poured over and endorsed by all participants. The upshot of Melanchthon's tactics, ironically, was that the assembled princes pressed him, along with the other theologians, to compose a document called *Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope*, known also as the *Tractate*. It is, if anything, even stronger in its denunciation of papal tyranny and the identification with the Antichrist. Moreover, it included an excellent statement on the

¹⁷*Concordia Triglotta: the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), 47.

priesthood of believers and authority in the church, especially the relation of the pastoral office to the congregation. It was duly subscribed at Smalcald and, along with Luther's articles, which had meanwhile been privately subscribed, came to be included likewise in the Book of Concord. The Tractate is most often spoken of as an appendix to the Smalcald Articles.

Difficult days followed Luther's death. On the papal side Paul III, under political pressure, finally managed to convene the Tridentine Council, which among other things successfully launched the counter Reformation. On the political scene Charles V's forces defeated the Lutheran allies, even capturing Elector John Frederick and Philip of Hesse. Eventually, however, the Lutheran side prevailed and, with the Peace of Passau (1552) followed by the Religious Peace of Augsburg (1555), achieved the right under imperial law to exercise their faith freely.

Meanwhile, with Luther gone, the church that bore his name became terribly torn by controversy. It was often bitter, usually involving substantive theological issues, at times partisan and fractious over who really had the mind of Luther. The disputes ranged over the nature of original sin, the role of the human will in conversion, the place of faith and good works in a believer's life, the proper distinction and function of law and gospel, the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the sacrament, the personal union of the divine and human natures in Christ's person, eternal election, church rites and adiaphora, and the like.

The Formula of Concord of 1577 accomplished the purpose for which Elector August of Saxony had called a select group of six theologians to Cloister Bergen, to settle the disputes and restore peace and harmony to the church. It was the distillation of very careful work, other earlier efforts by individuals and committees. The whole story is too long and involved to rehearse here.¹⁸ The Formula, with its Epitome, is the most comprehensive of the Lutheran Symbols. It is a strong theological piece of work, precise in formulations and definitions, rich with biblical references, and careful thetical and antithetical arrangement. Martin Chemnitz and Jacob Andreae are usually and with justice mentioned as the chief writers and architects of the finished product. While Schaff

¹⁸One may see E. F. Klug, *Getting Into the Formula of Concord* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1977).

labels it a "sectarian symbol," he, at the same time, acknowledges its high theological quality and efficacy in accomplishing the purpose for which it was drawn up, admitting that "it is quite probable that Luther himself would have heartily endorsed it."¹⁹

Confessional Lutherans today who assert and define their theology in accordance with the norm of the Book of Concord and the nine symbols it embraces value and wholeheartedly support the Formula of Concord. They deem it to have more than mere historical import. They resonate more to Krauth's estimate, perhaps overstated in the minds of some but not all, that "but for the Formula of Concord it may be questioned whether Protestantism could have been saved to the world."²⁰ At least confessionally-minded Lutherans are not likely to quibble about the accuracy of this prognostication for the Lutheran church. The Formula was and is a bulwark for the faith, first bravely spoken and defended at Worms and then at Augsburg.²¹

¹⁹Klug, *Getting Into the Formula*, 338.

²⁰Klug, *Getting Into the Formula*, 302.

²¹An abridged, shortened and altered version appeared as "Luther's Will and Testaments," *Christian History* 12 (1993): 48.