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The Augsburg Confession

• Lesson One •

Introduction to the Augsburg Confession

A. Important dates:

1. October 31, 1517
   The Ninety-five Theses are posted, statements meant for debate.

2. Diet of Leipzig, 1519
   Luther declares that a layman armed with Scripture is more powerful than a pope without it.

3. June 1520—Bull (an official degree) “Exsurge Domine”
   Luther is excommunicated.

4. 1521—Diet of Worms
   a. Luther, asked to recant, says he must stand upon what the Scriptures say and cannot recant.
   b. Later, Luther is declared an outlaw and anyone can legally kill him.


A confession (or a creed) is a statement of what one believes. Compare the Apostles’ Creed (I believe . . .) with the Nicene Creed (We believe . . .).

C. Earlier confessions

1. 1528—Luther’s “Confession about the Lord’s Supper.” Luther didn’t want to die and then have people say this is what he meant or that is what he meant. So he confessed not only what he believed about the Lord’s Supper but other basic doctrines of Scripture as well.

2. “Instructions to the Visitors of Parish Pastors in Electoral Saxony” of 1528. Because there was such a poor understanding of basic doctrine among rural pastors, a visitation program was set up in which the basic doctrines of Scripture were taught and discussed. The “Instructions” were used as a basis for that teaching and discussion.

3. July or August 1529—the Schwabach Articles. Written by Wittenberg theologians, these articles were to serve as a basis for union among German Protestants meeting at Schwabach on October 16, 1529. They later helped to serve as a basis for Articles 1 to 21 of the Augsburg Confession.

4. October 1529—the Marburg Articles. These articles were written by Luther following the meeting in which Luther and his followers met Zwingli and his followers at the Marburg Castle on October 2–4, 1529. Although both sides could agree on the first 14 articles, they could not agree on the 15th article, which spoke about the Lord’s Supper. The Marburg Articles helped to serve as a basis for Articles 1 to 21 of the Augsburg Confession.
D. Background to the Diet at Augsburg

1. January 21, 1530, Emperor Charles V called for a Diet at Augsburg in April 1530. His purpose:
   a. “How in the matter of errors and divisions concerning the holy faith and the Christian religion, we may and should deal and resolve . . . that divisions be allayed. . . . And that every care be taken to give a charitable hearing to every man’s opinion . . . and reconcile men to a unity in Christian truth.”
   b. To deal with the threat of the Turks and Islam.

2. March 1530—Elector John the Steadfast of Saxony commissioned Luther and his theologians to deal specifically with abuses that caused the Lutherans to make some changes. These were presented to the emperor at his castle in Torgau and become known as the “Torgau Articles.” They served as the basis for Part Two of the Augsburg Confession, Articles 22-28.

E. The Diet at Augsburg

1. May 2, 1530—Lutherans arrived at Augsburg without Luther. Luther stayed at the Coburg Fortress, maintaining contact through a messenger service. Why?
   He was still an outlaw.

2. June 15—the emperor and his court arrived in Augsburg.

3. June 20—the assembly was called to order.
   a. Dr. Eck, a prominent Catholic theologian, had published “404 Propositions.” In them he labeled Lutheran teaching as old heresy already condemned by the church. He classified the Lutherans as being similar to Zwingli, the Anabaptists, and even other radicals who denied some of the truths confessed in the three ecumenical creeds.
   b. A response was needed to Eck’s lies, not just where the two sides differed (Articles 22-28) but what the Lutherans truly believed and what they didn’t believe (Articles 1-21).

4. June 25—the Augsburg Confession was presented at 3:00 P.M. No Lutheran preaching was allowed. It had been originally scheduled for June 24. The Lutherans had been moved from a larger room to a smaller room.
   a. Melanchthon had used Eck’s propositions to form a confession of what Elector John of Saxony believed and what abuses needed changing.
   b. Other Lutheran lay leaders had signed the confession written for John the Steadfast.
   c. Chancellor Brueck had replaced Melanchthon’s preface with a general preface.
   d. It was written in both German and Latin. The emperor was presented with a Latin copy.
   e. Chancellor Brueck read the confession out loud in German. The Lutherans rose from their seats for the entire reading.

5. When Luther read it (early in July, he finally received a copy), he quoted Psalm 119:46. It later became a motto attached to the confession itself.
6. The Catholics responded with their “Confutation” on August 3, 1530. Lutherans were faced with losing their lands, threats of punishment, and exile. Although Melanchthon was tempted to waver, the laymen stood firm. Meetings to reconcile proved fruitless.

7. September 22 – the Diet was declared recessed.

F. Melanchthon responded with his “Apology” to the Augsburg Confession. He had a rough draft ready on September 22, but the emperor rejected it. Melanchthon continued to work on it and published the Apology along with the Augsburg Confession in April 1531. In it, Melanchthon was at his best. He was not at all timid but skillfully used Scripture and the writings of the early church to show that the Lutherans were teaching the truth and what the church had always held to be the truth. What does **apology** here mean?

Defense.

G. In 1537, at Smalcalden, Germany, where the Smalcald Articles were adopted, theologians present accepted both the Augsburg Confession and the Apology as formal confessions of their faith.

H. During the intervening years from 1531 to his death, Melanchthon continually reworked the Augsburg Confession, sometimes changing its meaning and softening its tone to the detriment of the confession itself. As a result, Lutherans began to call his later editions the Altered Augsburg Confession and stressed their allegiance to the Unaltered Augsburg Confession of 1530.

I. In 1580, both the unaltered Augsburg Confession and the Apology were incorporated into the Book of Concord.

**Questions:**

1. From 1517 on, what was the underlying basis for everything that the Lutherans taught?
   
   The Holy Scriptures.

2. Give some examples of how this became a confession of Lutherans and not just a confession of Martin Luther.

   It was originally signed by six Lutheran laymen. Subsequently many territorial churches in Germany and beyond came to subscribe to it.

3. Give some examples of the important role laypeople played at the time of the Reformation. What encouragement does that give you as to how the laity can serve today?

   Answers will vary.

4. How did God use the delaying tactics of the emperor for his own good?

   The emperor’s noninterference in Reformation lands allowed time for the preaching of the gospel to take deep root in people’s hearts.

5. Why might we better call the birthday of the Lutheran Church June 25, 1530, as opposed to October 31, 1517?

   The Augsburg Confession represented the beliefs of a large group of Christians. When Luther posted the Ninety-five Theses, he had no intention to separate from the Church of Rome.