

THE PRESENTATION OF THE AUGSBURG CONFESSION

October 31 is rightly celebrated as Reformation Day, the day in 1517 Martin Luther published 95 Theses for debate, an action considered to be one of the sparks of the Reformation. June 25, however, is at least as important. On this date in 1530, Chancellor Christian Beyer, a member of the government of Duke John, elector of Saxony, read before Holy Roman Emperor Charles V and a gathering of princes (a “Diet”) in the city of Augsburg, Germany, a confession of faith signed by seven princes and two city councils in whose lands the teachings of Luther and the Wittenberg reformers had taken root in the previous decade. Luther’s colleague, Philip Melancthon, is the principal author, though he used several previous documents in the preparation.

As he was still under the imperial ban, Luther himself was unable to attend the meeting in Augsburg. When Melancthon and other Lutheran theologians and princes arrived at Augsburg, they found that they were being accused of just about every heresy known to the church. So they decided to make a united Lutheran defence of their teaching, both confessing the Gospel teaching of the reformation, and also showing that it was nothing new. Not only is Lutheran teaching based solely on Scripture, it is essentially the doctrine of the church universal from the beginning. The purpose of the confession was also to explain why and how the churches of the Lutheran reformation had corrected certain abuses that had sprung up in the church.

The genius of the resulting Augsburg Confession is that, in clear and unambiguous terms, it shows how the Gospel, the good news of justification by grace for Christ’s sake received through faith alone, is the heart of every major teaching of the church. Drawn from Scripture, Lutheran theology seeks to bring the greatest comfort to hurting and broken people, to penitent sinners.

As Lutherans, we subscribe other confessional statements in the Book of Concord – Luther’s catechisms, the Formula of Concord, etc. – but none are more important than the Augsburg Confession. Here we insist that “we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits, works, or satisfactions, but that 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. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness, as Paul says in Romans 3:21-26 and 4:5.” (Augsburg Confession, Article IV, Tappert edition, p. 30).

This teaching is not only meant to comfort, but it begs to be confessed and proclaimed in the world. It is the beating Gospel heart of Christ’s mission through His church. Christian Beyer, it is said, proclaimed the text of this confession in a loud voice for all to hear. We also cannot keep it to ourselves, but must bring it to many more that they too might hear and believe. May we in our day faithfully confess this Bible teaching theology seeks to bring the greatest comfort to hurting and broken people, to penitent sinners.

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