

Introduction to The Augsburg Confession

2 Corinthians 5:21: *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*

There is quite a bit of information below. The teacher might find it helpful to present the information in an engaging way for the class (e.g. make a presentation on it, verbally summarize/highlight important points for the class, etc.). Alternatively, the teacher might *only* summarize the first paragraph so that there is optimal time to take a look at the articles of the Augsburg Confession.

Introduction

Happy birthday! Did you know that June 25 is considered the birthday of the Lutheran church? It was on this day in 1530 that the “evangelical party” (as the Lutheran protesters were called at that time) formally presented the confession of their faith at the official meeting of the rulers of the Holy Roman Empire (called a Diet) that was taking place in Augsburg, Germany. When the Lutherans’ Augsburg Confession was rejected by Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor, and papal representatives, the evangelical churches became known as a separate denomination to the Roman Catholic Church.

Despite the grand-sounding name, the Holy Roman Empire was, in reality, a confederation of territories and free cities in areas that include modern-day Germany, Switzerland, and northern Italy. As a member of the Habsburg family (the family that also ruled Spain, the Netherlands, Austria, and Hungary), Charles V had a lot of power, but he still needed the support of the German princes if he wanted to accomplish any of his major goals in the Holy Roman Empire. In 1530, one of those goals was to repel the Ottoman Turk army under Suleiman the Magnificent that was encroaching upon the eastern side of the Habsburg lands. Another was to settle doctrinal controversies that had erupted in the Holy Roman Empire in recent years. Charles V figured that he needed to achieve the second goal so that he could achieve the first. Besides, even though he had political differences with the pope, Charles was still a faithful Roman Catholic and wanted to ensure that all his subjects were faithful Roman Catholics as well.

One of the concerns for Charles V was Martin Luther’s protest, which had been gaining support. In 1521, he had summoned Luther to the Diet at Worms and demanded that he retract the doctrines that Luther had been teaching and printing. Luther humbly refused since he had not been shown from the Scriptures where he was wrong, and Luther was declared a heretic. This had not stopped Luther’s work. He went on to translate the New Testament into German by 1522 and his Large and Small Catechisms in 1529.

In 1529, Charles V defeated many of his political rivals but still had to deal with the advancing Turks. To get all parties in his empire on the same page, he invited them to Augsburg with the positive-sounding intention to consider “with love and kindness the opinions and views of everybody, in order to reduce them to one single Christian truth and agreement” (*Concordia Triglotta*, Concordia Publishing House, 1921, p. 15).

The Lutheran party set out for Augsburg on April 4, 1530. Martin Luther was convinced not to accompany them since many feared for his safety, but to remain at Coburg Castle that was in the southern area of the electorate of Saxony, about 160 miles from Augsburg. Elector John the Constant was a Lutheran and used his position to protect the Lutherans under his rule. When the Lutherans arrived at Augsburg, they soon realized that they were going to need to do more than simply defend the reforms that John had carried out in Saxony. A Catholic theologian, John Eck, had arrived in Augsburg before the Lutherans and published a treatise called the 404 Propositions. In this document, Eck misquoted the reformers and accused them of all kinds of heresies that had been rejected and condemned throughout the history of the Christian church. Then, when Charles V arrived in Augsburg on June 15, it became clear his goal was to force the evangelical party to compromise their beliefs. The Lutherans realized they were going to have to make a complete confession of their faith.

Martin Luther's fellow reformer, Philip Melancthon, wrote the Augsburg Confession. During the process, he was in regular contact with Martin Luther via letter. The result was a masterful work that bore the gentle style of Melancthon and the theology of Luther. It was prepared in both Latin and in German, although one is not a direct translation of the other.

The Augsburg Confession is made up of twenty-eight doctrinal articles. The first twenty-one confess the clear teachings of Scripture while rejecting all errors that go against those doctrines. The last seven articles point out errors in practice that had crept into the Roman Catholic Church which had been corrected in Lutheran territories. Throughout the confession there is a faithful and persistent testimony to the magnificent Scriptural truths that human beings are saved by God's grace alone, through faith alone, with Scripture alone.

Both theologians and leaders of all evangelical territories chose to adopt the marvelous Augsburg Confession as their own confession before the Holy Roman Emperor and the Papacy. By doing so, they all put their lives on the line to testify to Scriptural truth. Because the Augsburg Confession is a clear witness to God's truth, it would serve as a foundational confession for the Lutherans in the turbulent years that were to follow the Diet at Augsburg. It remains foundational for all those who call themselves confessional Lutherans to this day.

I provide the answers for the questions below, however, depending on time constraints, the teacher might consider asking the students to break out into groups to present their answer to each question to the class, or questions under each article might be divided among groups to consider and report back, etc.

Introduction

Some churches or church bodies don't have written confessions of faith. Sometimes they say that they believe what the Bible says, so why would they need to write out a confession. Our church body believes that having some written confessions of faith is important, perhaps even critical. Decide on three reasons why we might approach written confessions of faith the way that we do.

It is the nature of the Christian to...

- To confess his/her faith
- To unite with fellow believers
- To withdraw from those who believe falsely
- Confessions unite us around the truth

- Confessions separate us from those who mix truth with error
- The reality of sin and the devil at work means that there will be division in the visible church; there will be false teachers – goes back to Genesis 3:15.
- Many groups will say that they teach what the Bible teaches; we want it to be clear what we mean when we say that. “We teach what the Bible teaches, and we’re convinced that this is what the Bible teaches.”

Looking at the Augsburg Confession

Article II – *About Original Sin*

(Our churches teach) that since the fall of Adam, all human beings who are born in the natural way are conceived and born in sin. This means that from birth they are full of evil lust and inclination and cannot by nature possess true fear of God and true faith in God. Moreover, this same innate disease and original sin is truly sin and condemns to God’s eternal wrath all who are not in turn born anew through baptism and the Holy Spirit.¹

1. What are the ways that the concept of “original sin” described here?
 - It is a thorough corruption from conception, a complete spiritual deadness. There is not a spark of goodness or spiritual life in human beings naturally (Ro. 5:12-20). (Although original sin is not an essential part of what it means to be human; otherwise Adam & Eve and Jesus could not have been truly human).
 - It affects all those conceived in “the natural way.” This excludes Jesus, who was conceived in a supernatural way by the Holy Spirit (Ps. 51:5).
 - It is a total inability to keep the first table of God’s law, which also results in an inability to keep the second in a way that is recognizable to God (any appearance of keeping the second table is not done out of faith, love, and trust in God – Ro. 3:10-20).
 - It shows itself in a lust and inclination toward sinfulness – to disobey God’s rule and laws looks like freedom from tyranny and is attractive.
 - One does not “fall into” original sin. It is a state of being, the human “default mode.”

2. What implications of original sin do you see Article II list?
 - After the fall into sin, it thoroughly corrupts from conception all human beings, apart from Jesus. There is why even babies are able to die physically.
 - It is damnable. Without God’s solution to sin in Jesus, original and actual, no one can be with God in heaven.
 - The only relief from the state of spiritual deadness that is original sin is by God’s (the Holy Spirit’s) own intervention through the Means of Grace that create spiritual life.

¹ Kolb, R., Wengert, T. J., & Arand, *The Book of Concord: the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Augsburg Confession, Article II:1-2 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

3. Article II is really thorough in its description of original sin: ‘*all human beings, “conceived and born in sin,” “full of evil lust,” “condemns to God’s eternal wrath,”*’ etc. By nature we are oh-so-sinful! Decide on three reasons it’s vital for us believers to understand this if we are to make sense out of ourselves or to make sense out of life.”
 - Those who do not understand that we are utterly sinful from conception, spiritually dead and blind enemies of God by nature, think that it is possible to contribute in some way to their own salvation. If this would be true, Jesus’ work to redeem humanity is not sufficient and they attempt to credit themselves with at least some of the work that only Jesus could do.
 - This also helps each of us to understand why we struggle with sinful thoughts, words and actions.
 - This helps us to understand why so many sinful things happen in our world. Sinners are going to sin.
 - This helps us to have a realistic expectation of people. If everyone is a sinner, I can’t expect anyone to treat me (or anyone else) perfectly.

Article IV – About Justification

Our churches also teach that men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works but are freely justified for Christ’s sake through faith when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven on account of Christ, who by his death made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God imputes for righteousness in his sight.²

4. Put in your own words how the Augsburg Confession defines the term “justification.”
 - Note how the work of redemption is completely outside of us because human beings cannot save themselves; we cannot even participate in the slightest (i.e. the dead can show no signs of life). Redemption is God’s work completed in Jesus Christ. Human beings are declared innocent of all guilt (justified) and forgiven because of Jesus’ work that has paid the price necessary for all sins of all time already (2 Cor. 5:19-21). Through faith in Jesus, God gives us credit (imputes) for Jesus’ perfection (Ro. 3:22-25, 5:1-10, Eph. 2:8-9)
5. The statement, “We’re saved because of faith,” is at best unclear, or at worst, is heresy. Decide on two reasons we’d prefer *not* to say, “We’re saved because of faith.”
 - First, it sounds as if faith is the cause of salvation. This would mean that we are saved by something we do. Secondly, faith is only as good as the object in which it is placed. Many in the world have some sort of “faith.” Only faith in Jesus Christ is a saving faith, not because of faith but because Christ is its object. The New Testament states that we are saved by or through faith rather than because of faith.

² Thompson, Glen L., trans., *The Unaltered Augsburg Confession*, Augsburg Confession, Article IV:1-3 (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2005).

6. “Jesus is the atoning sacrifice for the whole world.” “We are saved through faith in Jesus.” Both those statements are true! Please give a couple of reasons how they can both be true at the same time.
- Jesus is the atoning sacrifice for the whole world (Jn. 1:29, 1 Jn 2:2). In other words, all people of all time have been reconciled with God through Jesus’ work (2 Cor. 5:19). In that sense, everyone has been forgiven. However, those who don’t believe it lose the blessings of it, and so forgiveness becomes our own through faith in Jesus. Unbelievers in Jesus do not possess forgiveness because they do not believe that they have already been forgiven in Jesus (Jn. 3:16-18).

Article V – About the Ministry³

So that we might receive this faith, God established the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments. For the Holy Spirit is given to people through the word and sacraments, the tools through which God works. Whenever and wherever it pleases God, this ministry creates faith in the hearts of those who hear the Gospel. And the gospel message is this: that not because of our own merits, but for Christ’s sake, God justifies those who believe that they are received into grace because of what Christ did.⁴

7. God uses his Means of Grace (the Gospel in word and sacraments) to create and preserve faith in Jesus. What are three reasons that this is so important to know?
- We can be confident that God can create or strengthen faith wherever his Means of Grace are present.
 - This reminds me of how important it is to keep on using the means of grace.
 - This encourages me to treasure Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and the Word.
 - This directs me in my parenting and grandparenting: I want and need to connect my (grand)kids to the means as often as possible.
 - Note: This is not to say that God does not have the ability to save apart from his means. He is omnipotent, after all. However, God has chosen to use his Gospel in word and sacraments to create and preserve faith in Jesus (Lk 16:29, Ro. 10:17) and urges us to focus on and use those means.
8. God wants all people to be saved, and yet not all people are going to heaven. What are some reasons that Article V gives us that explain this?
- Ultimately faith is God’s gift.
 - Not explicitly said, but implied is the idea that some people distort the gospel by saying we have to do something in order to be saved, thereby hindering God’s saving work.
 - Another way of asking this question is, “Why are some saved and not others?” If God wants all to be saved, and if God is omnipotent, then why isn’t everyone who hears the Gospel converted to faith in Jesus (Jn. 3:16-19 – If a person is converted

³ This article might also be entitled “About the Means of Grace,” since the major point of the article is God’s use of means to convey his grace to people.

⁴ Thompson, Augsburg Confession, Article V:1-3.

to faith in Jesus, that is God's work. If a person rejects faith in Jesus, it is their own fault). God does not choose some to be saved and others to go to hell (1 Tim. 2:3-6). His call to faith through his Means of Grace is equally effective and serious to all people. At the same time, those who are brought to faith did not resist the Gospel less than those who have rejected it, since that would make a believer's salvation contingent on something within themselves and not God. We recognize that this is logically untenable to our sin-infected mind, and we're okay with that, because God is far wiser than we are (Romans 11:33-36).

Article VI – Concerning the New Obedience

We teach that this faith must bring forth good fruits and that one must do the good works commanded by God, in accord with God's will. However, one must never rely on such works to earn justification in God's eyes. For we receive forgiveness of sins and justification only by faith. Christ himself says, "When you have done everything...say, 'We are unworthy servants'" (Luke 17:10). The church fathers teach this same thing.⁵

9. We are justified before God completely by Christ's work, and yet our good works are still very important. Please use Article VI to give three reasons why this statement is true.
 - Article VI of the Augsburg Confession testifies clearly to what the Apostle Paul says in Romans 6. Works are not necessary for our salvation, but they are necessary since they are what believers were made to do (Eph. 2:10); they are the "signs of life."
 - Because of the heavy emphasis that we are saved by grace alone, some accuse Lutherans of diminishing the importance of good works. The opposite is true. Since we have been made alive by forgiveness in Christ, we love to please the God who has done so much for us. So the confessors said, "... faith must bring forth good fruits."
 - Good works are to be done "in accord with God's will," that is, the "works commanded by God." They're important simply because God commands them.
 - Not mentioned in the article, but important to the discussion is that good works are often a way that the unbeliever becomes interested in Christianity.

10. Since the Bible describes good works as fruits of faith, what is the only way that we can encourage good works? Why is this so important to know?
 - Note – the teacher may decide to simply tell the answer to the first question, that only the Gospel can cause the believer to do good works.
 - "Fruits" reminds us that these are results of God-worked faith, not the cause of faith.
 - "Fruits" (pl) implies that these will look different in each believer, because God works individually in people's hearts, and each person has a unique circumstance.
 - "Fruits" may imply that these good works may take a long time to happen, just as fruit trees may need to grow for years before they produce.

⁵ Thompson, Augsburg Confession, Article VI:1-2.

- Since the law has no ability to empower what it demands, it reminds us that we need to hear/proclaim the Gospel if we want fruits to be borne.
 - This does not mean that Lutherans are “antinomian,” against the law. We must use the law to confront sin and to point out accountability and guilt. When a person acknowledges their guilt, we announce forgiveness of sins completely and totally in Christ Jesus. A fruit of repentance will be that sinner leaving their sin behind to serve the God who has forgiven them. Make no mistake, however. It is the Gospel that empowers that person to live like they have been saved, not more laws.
- 11.** Read Ephesians 2:8-10 and James 2:14-26. Please give a couple of reasons that explain how these passages do not contradict each other but really illustrate exactly what the Augsburg Confession is stating.
- Both James and Paul are stating the same point from two different perspectives. God is the one who gives faith and is the only one who can see it. Through this faith God has saved us. That faith will show itself in our actions. To the person who thinks that they can have faith but that their actions do not need to reflect their faith, James says that they have no faith at all since it is the nature of faith to do those works.

Summary and Conclusion

Please write down three reasons that it was important – perhaps even critical – for us to have read these segments of the Augsburg Confession today.

This is meant to call to mind the introductory exercise, that confessions are valuable. Answers will vary, and may vary quite widely. The teacher may want to encourage the learners to take a minute to glance back through the Confession before they answer this.

So, someone might say, “I really needed to be reminded of the depth of human sinfulness.” Someone else might say, “I needed to be reminded of the importance of the Means of Grace.” Yet another might say, “I needed to be reminded of the importance of doing good works.” Maybe someone says, “It was neat to be reminded that these people believed the same truths I believe.” Etc.

Some concluding thoughts: The Augsburg Confession is a summary of the truths that the Bible tells us are necessary to believe if we are to be saved. The devil, the world, and our sinful natures work very hard to corrupt our trust in these truths so that our faith is taken off of Jesus.

The Augsburg Confession is a beautiful and faithful testimony to the biblical truth that human beings are saved by God’s grace alone, through faith alone, with Scripture alone. God has already declared the world innocent of all sin and guilt through the completed work of Jesus, our Savior. People are given this gift through faith, which itself is another gift from God as God works through his Means of Grace—the Gospel in word and sacraments. Good works are the very fruit that grows from the living tree of our faith, which believers eagerly desire to do.