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# THE AUGSBURG CONFESSION TODAY

## Necessary Presuppositions

*Walter A. Ritter*

Since we read nothing without presupposition, we should declare them, also to ourselves, before we read the Augsburg Confession. The following historical and theological presuppositions are suggested from an historical study of Augsburg Confession. These presuppositions affirm and extenuate the confessional primacy of the Augsburg Confession, a primacy in time, in methodology, in function, and in symbolical authority.

Its primacy in time is validated as the first non-provincial evangelical confession. Its primacy in methodology is recognized by frequent references in other Confessions to its mode of explanation and by such phrases as “the gospel according to the Augsburg Confession.”<sup>1</sup> Its primacy in function is expressed in the Preface (an official part of the document) “that our differences may be reconciled and that we may be united in one true religion even as we are all under one Christ.”<sup>2</sup> Its primacy in symbolical authority is recognized by all documents in the Book of Concord written after 1530. These other documents describe themselves as being only appendages (Smalcald Articles Treatise), or restatement and explanation of the Augsburg Confession or of parts thereof (Formula of Concord-titles). Frequent quotation of the Augsburg Confession is found in all of them. The whole Book of Concord is therefore held to be “the correct Christian interpretation of the Augsburg Confession”.<sup>3</sup> It stands as the norm within the symbolical canon. It is not to be normed by later writings. Its post-Reformation distinction as the most widely subscribed document, together with the Small Catechism, among Lutheran churches, actualizes this pre-eminence of authority.

1. We can therefore affirm that a true evangelical confession IS CONSENSUS,

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1. Formula of Concord, Epitome 12/11, Tappert, p. 498 and Solid Declaration 12/16, *ibid.*, p. 634. Unless otherwise indicated, reference to the Lutheran Confessions is based on Theodore G. Tappert, editor, *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959).

2. Augsburg Confession, Preface 10, *ibid.*, p. 25.

3. *Book of Concord*, Preface, *ibid.*, p. 8, footnote 1.

expressing what can safely be called “common opinion.” Even in its authorship it is not the unilateral production of one person. It does not express “one man’s opinion.” The Schwabach and Torgau Articles may be revised. Chancellor Brueck may revise both Preface and conclusion in the Augsburg Confession. The Apology of the Augsburg Confession is drafted in consultation with others.<sup>4</sup> Jonas can freely paraphrase the German Apology.<sup>5</sup> The Wittenberg theologians can revise Luther’s Smalcald Articles and add an article on Invocation of Saints to the article by Luther on The Mass.<sup>6</sup> The Treatise is “composed by theologians” as its subtitle states, but it is written by Melanchthon. Luther first assigned the composition of the Small Catechism to others.<sup>7</sup> The time factor led him to compose both Catechisms, but with consultation and input from Bugenhagen, Melanchthon, Jonas, and Agricola.<sup>8</sup> The Formula of Concord is the composite of many theologians in its initial drafts. After critical perusal of over twenty written evaluations of the proposed draft, five men co-authored the final draft. The sixth signator, David Chytraeus, disclaimed the title of co-author.<sup>9</sup>

2. We can affirm that a true evangelical confession IS CONJUNCTIVE, not isolated from other confessions, either in parentage or offspring. Unlike most Reformed symbols, evangelical Confessions are parts of a *Corpus Doctrinae* in which the multiple documents inter-relate. Immediate additions to the Augsburg Confession in the form of an Apology and of a Treatise posed no difficulty. As in the sacred scriptures, the diversity of documents presents a richness of expression, approach, and concerns. Voluminosity is both liberating and clarifying.

3. We can affirm that a true evangelical confession IS ECUMENICAL, seeking to be and become an expression “which all true Christians ought to accept, next to the Word of God.”<sup>10</sup> It seeks not only amicable discussion for reconciliation, but also unity “in one true religion, even as we are all under one Christ.”<sup>11</sup>

4. We can affirm that a true evangelical confession IS CATHOLIC, affirming the definition of Vincent of Lerins (d. 450): “What has been believed always, everywhere, and by all”. But it understands this to be the tradition *ex scriptura*.<sup>12</sup> It seeks to teach nothing that departs from the Scriptures or the catholic church or the church of Rome, in so far as the ancient church is known to us from its writers.<sup>13</sup> Described its catholicity in his *Judgment On The Edict From Augsburg*, Luther says,

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4. Apology to the Augsburg Confession, Preface 10, *ibid.*, p. 99.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

6. Smalcald Articles II, 2. See *Die Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelischen Lutherischen Kirchen*, fifth edition (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck and Rupprecht, 1964), p. 424, footnote 4. Hereafter referred to as *Bekenntnisschriften*.

7. Tappert, p. 357.

8. See *ibid.*, p. 357.

9. Theodore W. Jungkuntz, *Formulators of the Formula of Concord* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1977), p. 129, footnote 61.

10. Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Introduction 4, Tappert, p. 502.

11. Augsburg Confession, Preface 10, *ibid.*, p. 25.

12. Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, translated by Walter A. Hansen, Volume 1 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), p. 288.

13. Augsburg Confession 21, Conclusion 1 (Latin), Tappert, p. 47.

"This teaching is not bound to any specific time, place, or person."<sup>14</sup>

5. We can affirm that a true evangelical confession IS TRADITIONAL. It loves tradition as "the living faith of the dead" while at the same time despising traditionalism as "the dead faith of the living."<sup>15</sup> Therefore a majority of its articles cite testimony from creeds, fathers, early canons and councils either explicitly, or implicitly by naming the sects which these councils condemned. Augustine is cited as "no inconsiderable authority."<sup>16</sup> Favorable patristic testimony disproves the important charge of innovation and new interpretation.<sup>17</sup> The church's example is seen "from the Scriptures AND the fathers."<sup>18</sup> It assumes the acceptance of the three ecumenical creeds by the Christian church. It cites them without argument in its opening basic articles of faith. It places them at the beginning of the confessional Corpus as being "possessed of highest authority."<sup>19</sup> It considers evangelical theology unfaithful insofar as it does not utilize the theological past.

6. We can affirm that a true evangelical confession IS MODERATE, avoiding petty sectarianism. It refuses to "lead our contemporaries still further from the opponent's position."<sup>20</sup> It is not blind to positive modifications among the opponents,<sup>21</sup> even if many other factors make them suspect.<sup>22</sup> It separates institutional abuses from persons by citing ancient and contemporary popes as "prudent and intelligent" men<sup>23</sup> whose decisions are worth noting.<sup>24</sup> It hopes to invert the oft-cited fellowship principle of "first pure, then peaceable" by affirming that "truth cannot be gathered from common rumors or the accusations of our enemies."<sup>25</sup> It knows that lack of love and sympathy guarantees misunderstanding, so it avoids a "snake-pit theology" which substitutes invective for wisdom and learning.

7. We can affirm that a true evangelical confession IS ESCHATOLOGICAL, confessing sin and professing faith in view of the end. It commends its cause "to Christ, who will one day judge these controversies."<sup>26</sup> It is aware of confessing "in these last times of which the scriptures speak."<sup>27</sup> It therefore expresses holy agitation and eschatological impatience for the church's mission and condition: "You see, Campegius, that these are the last times."<sup>28</sup>

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14. Johann Georg Walch, editor, *Doktor Martin Luther's Saemmtliche Schriften*, revised edition, 25 Volumes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1880-1910), 16:1539. Latter numerical reference is to column, not page. This work is subsequently referred to as "*Luther's Works*, St. Louis edition."

15. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition Volume 1: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 9.

16. Augsburg Confession 22/7, Tappert, p. 50.

17. Augsburg Confession 20/12, *ibid.*, p. 42f.

18. Augsburg Confession 24/40 (Latin), *ibid.*, p. 61.

19. Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Summary Formulation, footnote 4, *ibid.*, p. 504.

20. Apology to the Augsburg Confession, Preface 11, *ibid.*, p. 99.

21. Augsburg Confession 20/4-7, *ibid.*, p. 41.

22. Apology to the Augsburg Confession, 27-39, *ibid.*, p. 276.

23. Augsburg Confession 23/2, *ibid.*, p. 53-Pius II (1458-1464).

24. Augsburg Confession 22/7, *ibid.*, p. 50-Gelasius (492-496).

25. Augsburg Confession, Introduction 5, *ibid.*, p. 49.

26. Apology to the Augsburg Confession, Preface 19, *ibid.*, p. 99.

27. Augsburg Confession 23/4, *ibid.*, p. 53.

28. Apology to the Augsburg Confession 12/126, *ibid.*, p. 201.

8. We can affirm that a true evangelical confession IS METHODOLOGICAL in purpose, so much so that method determines content. It avoids narrow scholastic “definition-theology” and recognizes the truth of the Erasmian proverb: “every definition is a misfortune.” In theology, it believes that “nothing can be said so carefully that it can avoid misrepresentation.”<sup>29</sup> It admits that theological terms may be helpful even though “complete unanimity may be impossible” in their definition.<sup>30</sup> It does not hide behind new meanings for old words so it seeks to “stick as closely as possible to traditional doctrinal formulas”<sup>31</sup> without making them sacrosanct. Its method is shaped by function i.e. not to denigrate persons but to “contend for Christ.”<sup>32</sup> It seeks to preserve a treasure, not terminology. It remembers that theology, as taught by Jesus Christ, was taught in parables, not with dogmas and propositions. The depth and diversity of meaning in His parables was always both apparent and hidden. He taught “all things” and left “yet many things” which static statements and human understanding cannot exhaust. It therefore prefers functional description and characterization to definition. Hence the Ministry is described functionally in the Augsburg Confession, without a definition of status (Article 5). Likewise the sacraments are discussed (Articles 9,10) before any definition of the term is attempted (Article 13).

9. We can affirm that a true evangelical confession IS COMPREHENSIVE SUMMARY, but not exhaustive explanation. It presents “just about a summary”<sup>33</sup> of the doctrine preached and presents “only the principle” articles on abuses.<sup>34</sup> It does not wish to resolve every theological problem or question by framing an article of faith. In July 1530 the evangelical theologians at Augsburg discussed whether or not more articles should be submitted. They drew up a list of sixteen additional topics, discussed them, and decided they belong in academic classrooms rather than in the preaching of the church. Among the topics listed were: whether a layman can consecrate the sacrament, whether a woman can consecrate, whether ordination impresses an indelible character!<sup>35</sup>

10. We can affirm that a true evangelical confession IS WITHOUT *DE SCRIPTURA* that is, without an article or locus on the Scriptures. It demonstrates their primary authority by citing them as the inspired testimonies of the Holy Spirit.<sup>36</sup> It speaks from the Scriptures rather than about them. It establishes their center and speaks from that center, not from the periphery. It contains no article on the canon since that would not be truly scriptural. It agrees with Luther that the knowledge of biblical content (which is Christ) and of biblical intent (which is the Gospel) can safely leave the question of biblical extent to the realm of historical judgment. Although the problem is burdened with considerable unresolved dimensions, faith

29. Apology to the Augsburg Confession 7/2, *ibid.*, p. 128.

30. Apology to the Augsburg Confession 2/42, *ibid.*, p. 105 on “Original Sin.”

31. Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Preface 11, *ibid.*, p. 99.

32. Augsburg Confession, Preface 11, *ibid.*, p. 25.

33. Augsburg Confession 22, Conclusion 1, *ibid.*, p. 47.

34. Augsburg Confession; Conclusion 1, *ibid.*, p. 94.

35. *Luther's Works*, St. Louis edition, 16:891f.

36. Augsburg Confession 28/49, Tappert, p. 89, Apology of the Augsburg Confession 4/108, *ibid.*, p. 122.

trusts the Spirit's guidance in the historical process.

11. We can affirm that a true evangelical confession IS WITHOUT *DE SANCTE SPIRITU*, that is, without a special article on the Holy Spirit. He and his work are best discussed within the context of function i.e. under Christology and Conversion. The use of "Holy Spirit" titles in earlier confessions quickly disappeared in their successors. "On Obtaining the Holy Ghost" was the title of Augsburg Confession Article IV in some early manuscripts but it was soon substituted by "Justification." It is a biblical pattern to name separately only the Father and the Son without mention of the Spirit (e.g. I Cor. 8:8). His purpose begins with the Father, embraces mankind in conversion, and ends with glorifying the Son. To separate his divine function from Christology has kinship with pagan Dualism and with the denial of Incarnation.

12. We can affirm that a true evangelical confession IS *EX SCRIPTURA*. It speaks from the Sacred Scriptures, drawing its primary evidence and decisive confession from them, even though it has not defined the canon! It usually presents this evidence first, before any patristic citation. It cites scripture as testimony and witness (*testimonia, Zeugnis aus der Schrift*)<sup>37</sup> rather than as "proof-texts." Its *SOLA SCRIPTURA* does not mean *NUDA SCRIPTURA* but *TOTA SCRIPTURA*. Thus, pure teaching must be on the "solid basis of divine command OR scripture".<sup>38</sup> It must not be contrary to "scriptures OR the Gospel" but must agree "with the pure word of God AND Christian truth."<sup>39</sup> Sacraments administered "in accordance with the divine Word" does not simply mean according to the scriptures but "according to the Gospel."<sup>40</sup> The phrase "Word of God" is used first as a synonym for the Son of God and secondly as synonym for "external Word of the Gospel" or "the ministry of teaching the Gospel."<sup>42</sup> The marks of the church are either true "Word and Sacraments" or "Gospel and Sacraments."<sup>43</sup> While there is equivalence between "Word of God" and "the scriptures", there is certainly not a simple identity. Even the later Formula of Concord consistently and frequently uses the term "the true Book of Life" as a synonym for Jesus Christ, not for the Bible.<sup>44</sup>

13. We can affirm that a true evangelical confession IS *CHRISTOCENTRIC* or Gospel-centered. From the viewpoint of God's grace this means that whatever disparages or obscures the glory, merit, suffering, or power of Christ must be false teaching and practice.<sup>45</sup> From the viewpoint of faith it means that whatever robs

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37. Frequently translated poorly as "proof" in Tappert, e.g., Augsburg Confession 21/2, *Bekennnisschriften*, p. 83b, speaks of *docet* (taught) and *beweisen* (show, demonstrate). See also Augsburg Confession 26/22, *ibid.*, p. 104. Translation in Tappert, pp. 47 and 67 respectively.

38. Augsburg Confession, Conclusion 2, Tappert, p. 48.

39. Augsburg Confession 21, Conclusion 1, *ibid.*, p. 47. Compare the Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration 8/96, *ibid.*, p. 609.

40. Augsburg Confession 7/2-3, *ibid.*, p. 32.

41. Augsburg Confession 1/6 and 3/1 (Latin), *ibid.*, pp. 28 and 29.

42. Augsburg Confession 5/4, *ibid.*, p. 31. The Schwabach Articles read *muendlich Wort*, i.e., "spoken."

43. Apology of the Augsburg Confession 7/7 and 20, *ibid.*, pp. 169 and 171.

44. In the formula of Concord, Epitome and Solid Declaration 11, the term is used six times. See *ibid.*, pp. 494-497; 616-632.

45. Augsburg Confession 2/3, *ibid.*, p. 29; 24/24, *ibid.*, p. 58; 27/39, *ibid.*, p. 77.

poor sinners of the comfort and consolation of the Gospel must be false.<sup>46</sup> The Ministry is nothing else than the function of teaching the Gospel<sup>47</sup> and administering sacraments according to the Gospel.<sup>48</sup> Human ordinances instituted for propitiation before God are wrong simply because they are contrary to the Gospel,<sup>49</sup> as is also the lack of emphasis on the necessity of faith.<sup>50</sup> There is only one doctrine, the doctrine of the Gospel or of Christ, but the one doctrine is expressed in many “articles of faith.” Jesus Christ is the substance of all the holy scriptures, and the Law and Gospel are the summary of the whole scriptures. “The Gospel is the norm in the Scripture, and Scripture is the norm for the sake of the Gospel.”<sup>51</sup> False teaching and practice not only obscure Christ’s grace and the teaching of faith<sup>52</sup> but they insult Christ and bury Him.<sup>53</sup> Even the apostolic prohibition of foods at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) must finally be confined among Christians by “the perpetual aim of the gospel.”<sup>54</sup> This is the proper distinction between Law and Gospel,<sup>55</sup> a distinction which always hears the phrase “love of God” as love FROM God before there can ever be love FOR God. The distinction sees “justification” as satisfactions prepared by God for people, and not rendered by people to God.

14. We can affirm that a true evangelical confession IS SACRAMENTAL in its theology. It sees the greatest potential for perverting the Gospel not simply in gross works-righteousness and traditionalism but, even more, in the subtleties of a non-sacramental theology. This kind of theology refuses to take seriously man’s natural condition with terminal illness and the necessity of God’s grace, power, and cure offered through material stuff. That material stuff begins with the Son of Man in Mary and extends to water in baptism and bread and wine in the Supper. If the divine God cannot fully reside “in, with and under” material means, then He remains forever hidden and unknowable to material man. Melancthon’s eventual failure to accommodate Swiss and Calvinistic theology shows that, ultimately, evangelical theology is closer to the sacramental theology of Rome than to the theology of biblicistic Protestantism. Even Melancthon’s sacramental theology began to choke on what he later called “bread worship.”<sup>56</sup>

46. Augsburg Confession 20/15, *ibid.*, p. 43; 24/30, *ibid.*, p. 59; 25/4, *ibid.*, p. 62; 26/4, *ibid.*, p. 64.

47. Augsburg Confession 5/1 (Latin), *ibid.*, p. 31.

48. Augsburg Confession 7/1, *ibid.*, p. 32.

49. Augsburg Confession 15/3, *ibid.*, p. 36; 26/29, *ibid.*, p. 68.

50. Augsburg Confession 26/20, *ibid.*, p. 67.

51. Edmund Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, translated by Paul F. Koehneke and Herbert J.A. Boumann (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), p. 6.

52. Augsburg Confession 26/4, Tappert, p. 64.

53. Apology of the Augsburg Confession 4/18 and 150, *ibid.*, pp. 109, 127.

54. Augsburg Confession 28/65 (Latin), *ibid.*, p. 92.

55. Apology of the Augsburg Confession 4/2, *ibid.*, 107.

56. Letter to Calvin, 14 October 1554. See Fredrick Bente, *Historical Introduction to the Book of Concord* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1965), p. 179.