The Augsburg Confession and Its Apology

The Lutheran Confessions Series
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Introduction

The Story of the Augsburg Confession

On January 21, 1530, Emperor Charles V called for a general assembly—an imperial diet—to be held in Augsburg, Germany. Convened to deal with the threat of the Turks to the empire and the Lutheran–Roman Catholic disagreement that was dividing the Church, the assembly was held later that year.

For the assembly, the Lutherans prepared a confession of what they believed and taught on the basis of Holy Scripture. Using previously drafted documents and the guidance of Dr. Martin Luther, Philip Melanchthon, a professor friend and colleague of Luther, wrote the Augsburg Confession in both German and Latin. Dr. Luther did not attend the assembly in Augsburg because he was under the imperial ban. That ban declared he could be killed on sight by anyone. Thus, Luther stayed safely in a castle at Coburg under the protection of the Elector of Saxony.

On behalf of the Lutherans, on June 25, 1530, a layman, Dr. Christian Beyer, read the German version of the Lutheran confession before the assembled emperor, rulers, and churchmen. At the conclusion of his presentation, Chancellor Beyer said to Emperor Charles V, “Most gracious Emperor, this is a Confession which, with the grace and help of God, will prevail even against the gates of hell.” That day in Augsburg was truly the birthday of the Lutheran Church.

Using This Guide

Each of these study guides on the Lutheran Confessions has thirteen sessions. Following a Law/Gospel focus and a litany for worship, sessions are divided into four easy-to-use sections. These are noted in the Leader Guide by their bold, centered titles appearing within the text.

Focus—Section 1 focuses the participant’s attention on the key concept that will be discovered in the session.
Inform—Section 2 explores a portion of the Confessions and questions that help the participant study the text.
Connect—Section 3 helps the participant apply the doctrine to their lives.
Vision—Section 4 provides the participant with practical suggestions for taking the theme of the lesson out of the classroom and into the world. This section also concludes with a hymn for worship and a reading assignment for the following week.

May God bless the study of His truth as we celebrate His grace to us through Jesus, our Lord. By the power of the Holy Spirit, may we focus again on the rich heritage that is ours as the people of God in Christ.
Session 1

Bible-Based Truth

The Augsburg Confession: An Introduction

Law/ Gospel Focus

God calls us to believe His truth revealed in the Holy Scriptures. Yet we often listen to the traditions and philosophies of this world; we fail to acknowledge and confess that God’s Word is the only source for Christian faith and living. By His death and resurrection, Jesus has atoned for our disobedience to the Word of God. For Jesus’ sake, God forgives us and by His Holy Spirit empowers us for faithfulness to His Word.

Opening Worship

Read together the following litany based on Hebrews 13.

Leader: Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.

Participants: Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

Leader: Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace.

Participants: Through Him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge His name.

Leader: Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.

Participants: Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

All: Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

Sign Here

“Sign this confession.” Sometimes we speak of a confession as an acknowledgment of wrongdoings. Yet a confession can also be a positive statement of belief. We confess what we believe about someone or something.
The Christian Church has always had statements of what God’s people believe, teach, and confess. Rooted in the sacred Scriptures, these confessions are public statements for all people to read and accept.

1. Statements of belief are common today; clubs and associations often have formal confessions. What kinds of organizations have statements of belief? What do their statements include? Why are these confessions important?

2. Why are Christian Confessions, like the Augsburg Confession, important today?

3. What happens when God’s people are not clear about what they believe and confess?

A Complete Summary

The Augsburg Confession

Most invincible Emperor, Caesar Augustus, most clement Lord: Your Imperial Majesty has summoned a meeting of the Empire here at Augsburg. . . . This meeting is also to consider disagreements in our holy religion, the Christian faith, by hearing everyone’s opinions and judgments in each other’s presence. They are to be considered and evaluated among ourselves in mutual charity, mercy, and kindness. After the removal and correction of things that either side has understood differently, these matters may be settled and brought back to one simple truth and Christian concord. Then we may embrace and maintain the future of one pure and true religion under one Christ. (AC Preface 1–4)

At the very beginning of the meeting in Augsburg, Your Imperial Majesty made a proposal to the electors, princes, and other estates of the Empire. Among other things, you asked that the several estates of the Empire—on the strength of the Imperial edict—should submit their explanations, opinions, and judgments in German and Latin. . . . Therefore, concerning this religious matter, we offer this Confession. It is ours and our preachers’. It shows, from the Holy Scriptures and God’s pure Word, what has been up to this time presented in our lands, dukedoms, dominions, and cities, and taught in our churches. (AC Preface 6–8)

There has always been harmonious action and agreement among the electors, princes, and other estates to hold a Council, in all the Imperial Meetings held during Your Majesty’s reign. Even before this time, we have appealed this great and grave matter, to the assembly of this General Council, and to your Imperial Majesty, in an appropriate matter. We still stand by this appeal, both to your Imperial Majesty and to a Council. We have no intention to abandon our appeal, with this or any other document. . . .

In regard to this appeal we solemnly and publicly testify here. (AC Preface 21–24)
This then is nearly a complete summary of our teaching. As can be seen, there is nothing that varies from the Scriptures, or from the Church universal, or from the Church of Rome, as known from its writers. Since this is the case, those who insist that our teachers are to be regarded as heretics are judging harshly. There is, however, disagreement on certain abuses that have crept into the Church without rightful authority. Even here, if there are some differences, the bishops should bear with us patiently because of the Confession we have just reviewed. Even the Church’s canon law is not so severe that it demands the same rites everywhere. Nor, for that matter, have the rites of all churches ever been the same. (AC XXI, A Summary of the Conflict, 1–3)

Discussing the Text

4. A diet is a parliamentary general assembly of political leaders. Who called the diet at Augsburg? What issue faced the empire? the Church?

5. The primary author of the Augsburg Confession was Philip Melanchthon, friend and co-worker of Martin Luther. In what sense, though, does the Augsburg Confession represent all evangelicals of the time?

6. Describe the tone of the Preface. Why was it important to write and speak this way?

7. What two points did the confessors at Augsburg want to demonstrate with their Confession?

8. In what ways do the confessors take their responsibility seriously?

9. What action did the Lutheran confessors request of Emperor Charles V in the event that the differences between the Lutherans and the Roman Catholics were not peacefully settled?
Defending the Faith

After the Augsburg Confession was read aloud and presented to the emperor, a second document was prepared to answer the criticisms brought against the reformers’ theology. Philip Melanchthon wrote this confession too: The Apology (or Defense) of the Augsburg Confession. The Apology is the first and most notable commentary on the Augsburg Confession. Like the Augsburg Confession, it assures us that, even though we often waver in our faith and fail to live according to our Christian confession, God in Christ is the One who rescues us from sin and every evil and time and again sets our feet on the right path of faith and life.

The Apology of the Augsburg Confession

Reader, you now have our Apology. From it you will understand not only what the adversaries said about our Confession (for we have reported in good faith), but also that— contrary to the clear Scripture of the Holy Spirit—they condemned several articles. . . .

I [Philip Melanchthon] have written with the greatest moderation possible. If any expression appears too severe, I must say that I am arguing with the theologians and monks who wrote the Confutation, not with the emperor or the princes, whom I hold in due esteem. . . .

Yet I did not discuss all their sophistries, for it would be an endless task. Instead I deal with the chief arguments, so that all nations will have a clear testimony from us that we hold the Gospel of Christ correctly and piously. Disagreement does not delight us, neither are we indifferent to our danger. . . . Yet we cannot abandon truth that is clear and necessary for the Church. . . .

We have the public testimony of many good men, who give thanks to God for this great blessing: our Confession teaches many necessary things better than any of our adversaries’ books.

We will commend our cause to Christ, who will someday judge these controversies. We beg Him to look upon the afflicted and scattered churches and to bring them back to godly and continuous harmony. (Ap Preface 9–19)

10. Why did the Lutheran confessors find it necessary to draft a reply defending the Augsburg Confession?

11. Characterize and evaluate Philip Melanchthon’s tone in writing the Apology of the Augsburg Confession. What can we learn from him for our sharing the Gospel today? (See also 1 Peter 3:15–16.)
12. What are some of the difficulties and dangers that we can expect as we witness our faith “so that all nations will have a clear testimony from us that we hold the Gospel of Christ correctly and piously”?

13. What does Melanchthon pray for God’s Church? What can we, as God’s redeemed people in Christ, pray for the Church and her mission today?

Life in the Body

Personal Reflection

• Ask a friend what he or she thinks about the value of confessions of faith in the Church. Share what you believe about the importance of your confession.
• Read Ephesians 4:1–16. How does St. Paul’s imagery of the body help you understand the Church and your life in Christ?
• Write a brief confession of a Christian belief dear to you. Share it with God in prayer.

Family Connection

• Read Philippians 2:5–11 as a confession of the servanthood, salvation work, and exaltation of Jesus Christ. Talk about why Jesus Christ became “obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”
• Pray together for the Christian Church throughout the world. Ask God to restore His Church to “godly and continuous harmony.”
• Share what the words of St. Paul to Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:14–17 tell you about the necessity, character, and purposes of Holy Scriptures.

Closing Worship

Sing or pray together “O Word of God Incarnate” (Lutheran Worship 335).

O Word of God incarnate,
O Wisdom from on high,
O Truth unchanging, unchanging,
O Light of our dark sky:
We praise You for the radiance
That from the hallowed page,
A lantern to our footsteps,
Shines on from age to age.

The Church from You, dear Master,
Received the gift divine;
And still that light is lifted
O’er all the earth to shine.
It is the chart and compass
That, all life’s voyage through,
Mid mists and rocks and quicksands
Still guides, O Christ, to You.

Oh, make Your Church, dear Savior,
A lamp of burnished gold
To bear before the nations
Your true light as of old!
Oh, teach Your wand’ring pilgrims
By this their path to trace
Till, clouds and darkness ended,
They see You face to face!

For Next Week
Read Article I of the Augsburg Confession.