

Henry Eyster Jacobs

A Brief Introduction To The Lutheran Confessions



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Lutheran Confessions

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A Brief Introduction to the Lutheran Confessions

ON THE AFTERNOON of Saturday the 25th of June 1530, between the hours of four and six, the Augsburg Confession, the fundamental creed of Protestant Christianity, was read before the Emperor Charles V., in the chapel of the Palatine palace at Augsburg. On the 25th of June, 1580, at Dresden in Saxony, appeared the first edition of the Book of Concord, comprising a full collection of the creeds to which the Lutheran Church attaches symbolical authority, and marking the completion of the process whereby the scriptural doctrines maintained in the Augsburg Confession, amidst the trials of severe controversy and bitter persecution, had been formulated into ampler and more explicit confessional statements.

Jubilees Of The Confessions

By suitable services and other testimonials of gratitude to God, our fathers in the faith have commemorated every fiftieth and one hundredth anniversary of these great events—the one hundredth anniversary of each as the proper, and the fiftieth as a secondary jubilee. The first semi-centennial anniversary of the Augsburg Confession was celebrated not only by appropriate jubilee verses, but the publication of the Book of Concord was itself the most fitting commemoration that could have been made.

The first centenary of the Augsburg Confession was marked not only by the arrival upon German soil, on the 25th of June, 1630, of the Swedish Lutheran King, Gustavus Adolphus, who in the darkest hour of the Thirty Years' War, hastened to the aid of his brethren in the faith, calling Heaven to witness as he disembarked, that his motive was a religious and not a political one, but also by a general observance in the churches, as is attested by an entire volume, devoted to an account of the celebration in Saxony,

and another, presenting a full order of divine service, for the three days, the 25th, 26th and 27th, on which the Jubilee was held, as well as for the 24th, St. John the Baptist's day, which was devoted to a preparatory service.

In 1680, the first centenary of the Book of Concord was not passed by unnoticed. It too has left its record in commemorative verses and discourses. One of the latter styles it the fourth Jubilee of the Evangelical Church, following 1617, the first Jubilee of the Reformation; 1730, of the Augsburg Confession; and 1655, of the peace of Augsburg. Dr. Philip Jacob Spener, in a letter preserved in his *Consilia et Judicia*, laments, however, that while what he calls the Jubilee of the Formula of Concord ought to have been observed throughout our entire Church, at least in Germany, — there was a suitable commemoration nowhere in upper Germany, except in Württemberg; and while mentioning the illness and subsequent death of the Elector of Saxony, and a prevailing epidemic as a partial explanation of the fact that the celebration was not more extensive, complains of the slowness and coldness of the Church in failing to render due thanks to God for his goodness in preserving the truth.

1730 yielded the Church rich fruit. The celebration was universal. In most places, services of three consecutive days, after the order of 1630, were held; at each of which the Holy Communion was administered, and by a proper distribution among the services of the three days, the entire Augsburg Confession was read in course, as had also been done in 1630, while between three and four o'clock of June 25th the church bells summoned the people to their closets for private thanksgiving. Fenerlin, after enumerating sixty-seven titles of special jubilee publications of 1730, comprising popular historical sketches, sermons, catechisms, mission reports, and collections of hymns and prayers, points to other authorities where still additional titles may be found. But yet more important were the works of permanent value, such as the histories of the Augsburg Confession by Cyprian and Salig, the Introduction to the Symbolical Books by the older Walch, and the valuable edition of the Book of Concord by Pfaff, which marked this Jubilee.

1780 falling in the dreary period of the prevalence of rationalism, has left us only a few memorials. But 1830 was another era of renewed attention to the Confessions of the Church, to which we owe especially a number of valuable editions of the Augsburg Confession, as well as of the entire Book of Concord. The *Index Librorum* of Friedlander gives four

hundred and six titles of Jubilee publications of 1830 in Germany, Denmark, Sweden, France and Russia.

Relation Of Christian Life Of The Present To That Of The Past

But a higher call than the mere desire to conform to the usages of our fathers, urged us to make of 1880, a Jubilee year. As students of God's word, we are not ignorant of the frequent reproofs, with which the God of Israel censured his people for their failure to learn the great lessons of their history, and for their forgetfulness of the mighty acts, whereby he had manifested himself as their deliverer. God's promises to his church are not mere vague, indefinite assurances, upon which we may trust indeed for the future; but which vanish, the moment we attempt to trace their course in the past. Mysterious though the workings of God's Spirit are, yet all through the history of the world, they have left memorials of their presence; and the Church which now exists, is edified and confirmed in the faith, and prepared for final victory, not only through the direct influence of the very letter of inspiration, the water of life drawn afresh at the very fountain of Israel, —but also, through the life which the word of inspiration has before communicated, which has been such a mighty power in former days, and which as an organ of God's Spirit must continue, in the record of the experience of the church of the past, to live and work until the end of time.

An infallible rule has been given us whereby to test all teachers and doctrines, and thus to discriminate between a true and a spurious experience. Guided by this rule, and applying this standard, at every step in our course, the entire history of the church becomes to us a wide field, where we find on every side bountiful harvests, the fruit of the seed of the word developed in Christian experience; and to despise or ignore this fruit, is to despise or ignore the seed whence it has sprung and the Holy Ghost, upon whose working the result depended. We cannot expunge a single line from the Church's history without dishonoring the Head of the Church, by whose wise hand every point in that history has been determined; for the history of the Church is the history of the triumphant progress of God's Spirit in his conflict with the kingdom of Satan, —the history of the

victories of faith in her ever-progressive realization of the promise that she is to overcome the world.

Crises In Christian Life, The Origin Of The Confessions

If this then be true of the entire history of the Church, it is preeminently applicable to every epoch in her history, that marks some great crisis; when evils that have long been growing have reached their full development, and the inevitable hour of conflict has at last arrived; when the very existence of the Church, to human eyes seems imperiled; when great principles, essential not only to the life of the Church as an organism, but to the spiritual life of every member of the Church, are undermined by stealthy and insidious attacks, against whose approach the Church is with difficulty aroused and armed to meet the danger, and in whose discomfiture and overthrow, not feeble, trembling men, who scarcely know the significance of their own acts, but Almighty God, gains all the glory. There are points in the Church's history, years, months, days, in which all the evil that has ever assailed the Church, seems brought to a focus, and to overcome it, the Holy Ghost, who never deserts his charge, concentrates against it not only the sum of all the experience of the Church of the past, but also the endowments of new, fuller, richer unfoldings of the sense and power of God's Word. The Book of Concord of 1580, beginning with the Apostles' Creed and ending with the Formula of Concord, is entitled to this respect as a memorial of a number of such most important epochs; so that the history of the Book of Concord may be considered in a certain sense as almost epitomizing the entire history of the Church.

But it is more than a memorial. The Jubilee of 1880 has been not the mere commemoration of an event, or a series of events, such as, in a certain measure, was the Jubilee of 1867, whose blessed results are still fresh in the memory of our churches. It is a thanksgiving for God's goodness, not only in repelling dangerous error and unfolding the truth of his word at several critical periods; but also that the defenses which God's Spirit then employed, still stand, and the weapons which God's Spirit then forged, are ours and our children's forever. We thank God for the strong walls erected against the subsequent approach of the errors that then threatened our faith,

which also serve to remind posterity, (through the word of God inwrought into the experience of the Church,) as to where the otherwise perhaps imperceptible line of danger still runs.

The Truths Of The Confessions, Living Truth

Nor is the Book of Concord, born of the Church's agony, a collection of cold, dead formulae, or a summary of abstract fossilized theories. The truth confessed by these creeds is living truth. It is no less living than when it stands on the pages of revelation, for having been applied by God's Spirit to believing men in their conflicts within their own hearts and against the world, and then having found expression from lips that could say: "We speak that we do know, and we testify that we have seen."

As it pleases God, not by the mere letter of the Word, used as an amulet, but by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe, so too it pleases Him by every clear and distinct confession of His truth in its relation to the peculiar circumstances in which His Providence has placed Christian men, to free others from error, to confirm them in the faith, and to build them up in the divine life. Now it is the glory of our Lutheran Confessions, that while indeed, in some of their minor arguments and illustrations and citations, it is not impossible to detect slight errors, such for instance as the Apology's unconditional endorsement of Aristotle's *Ethics*, its derivation of the word mass from the Hebrew instead of the Latin, its application of several Scriptural passages, its not sufficiently guarded use of several ecclesiastical terms, such as "Sacraments" and "Gospel," yet in all direct statements of doctrines, in all their expressions concerning that which is properly the subject of discussion, upon which the controversies decided turned, and the thought of the Church, under the guidance of the Holy Ghost, was concentrated, they confess the very truth of God, the living truth of God, which being a development of the living and powerful seed of the Word, is itself living and powerful, and destined to impart and develop its life, wherever heard and studied and received.

For a true revival of the Church at any period when it has lapsed with a condition of relative coldness and indifference to divine things, we need not only the Holy Scriptures (precious and life-giving though they are); but also at least on the part of our ministers and teachers who are to apply this Word

to the necessities of the times, we find a most important aid in the thorough study of the text, the inner history, the growth and the external relations of the Confessions of the Church, that show so clearly how in the years when the thoughts of generations were most extensively and profoundly agitated concerning the most important questions that can be pondered, the Holy Ghost, using the agency of devout men learned in the Scriptures and well versed in the Church's history, applied this Word for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.

The Subject Matter Of The Confessions

For the subjects with which our Confessions are occupied are not mere theological problems concerning matters that lie remote from the center of the Christian life, speculations that may be in place in theological schools, but that are of no service to the people. On the contrary, the great theme of our Confessions is the consideration of those very questions that are most prominent in Christian experience and most essential to the Christian life:

- The utter ruin and corruption of our race;
- The weakness and helplessness of human powers;
- The width and depth of the demands of God's law;
- The way of salvation through the incarnation, the active and the passive obedience even to the death on the cross of God's own Son;
- The gracious efficiency of the Holy Ghost, through the Word and Sacraments working faith in those who resist not, and progressively inspiring the believing soul with love to God and man, and adorning it with good works, prompted by the law of God written in the heart;
- The necessity of daily repentance and the constant mortification of the old Adam with all his lusts and passions;
- The comfort of the absolution pronounced in the Gospel;
- The blessedness of the communion and union of the believer with Christ in this life, and in the life to come —

— such are the great themes of which our Confessions treat, such the doctrines that they so triumphantly defend against legions of errors that from ever shifting standpoints constantly are renewing their attacks. The

Confessions only present to the light of day the contest in varied relations through which every Christian heart is passing.

In their most profound discussions they sometimes pause and ask:

- “How will this doctrine appear to a heart struggling under a sense of God’s wrath?”
- “What comfort will this bring a wounded conscience?”
- “How are men struggling under the weight of their sins, upon their deathbeds to be taught the way of life?”

– and with the earnestness of men to whom such questions are of more importance than the whole world, and who after intense conflict have at length entered into the peace which God promises His children, they not only ask them, but present, from the Word of God, a clear and irrefutable answer, on which the heart can rest.

Hence the real interest which is felt in the Confessions must be in proportion to the degree in which the experience portrayed in the Confessions corresponds with our own. As we read in them the doubts and difficulties that have had an existence in our own inner life, and recognize the solutions there presented, as those also which God’s Spirit in his Word has given us, the Confessions become as dear to us as our own Christian experience, and we can no more disown them, or fail to acknowledge and defend them, than we can deny our Christian life, and all upon which that life depends.

The Ecumenical Creeds

Taking now in our hands, the volume which we have thus declared so worthy of our attention and study, and whose possession should urge us to such grateful acknowledgment to God for his goodness, let us briefly note its contents. We find here *nine creeds*. *Three* of them have been inherited from the early Church. The term *ecumenical* applied to them by the Formula of Concord, and thence adopted into theological terminology, because of their general acceptance by Christendom, is not to be understood in the strictest sense, since the Greek Church does not accept the Apostles’ Creed, and has never formally sanctioned the Athanasian; while in many

portions of the Reformed churches, the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds are practically ignored.

The *Apostles' Creed* is the expansion of the baptismal formula by a gradual process, involving numerous transitions, which mark the progress of the Church in her conflicts with various errors of the first five or six centuries. The history of its gradual development is a type of the history of the entire Book of Concord. When in public worship, we unite in confessing our faith in its familiar words, we rarely think of the controversies that determined the formulation of its explicit and comforting articles, and that thus *almost every clause is a memorial of a victory over dangerous error*. Thus in the first article, a clause which at first thought, seems to bear the least trace of controversy: "Maker of Heaven and Earth," is the result of the Church's conflict with Gnosticism. The Gnostics are almost forgotten, but their presence served a good purpose in the history of the Church; for as the growth of the individual Christian in the divine life is conditioned by his successful conflict with constant opposition, so the treasure of doctrine which the Church possesses in Holy Scripture is unfolded, and brought the more clearly and distinctly to her consciousness, through the attacks of the enemies of the truth.

The baptismal formula and what was known in the early Church as the rule of faith (although of course only in a general sense; for in a proper sense, the Holy Scriptures are the only rule of faith) were in the beginning identical. Yet as the number of errors multiplied, and the attention of the Church centered upon the controverted points, in the Western Church it was soon deemed best to require of the ministers of the Word a more explicit confession, than of the applicants for Church membership. Thus the rule of faith was enlarged beyond the baptismal confession. The Eastern Church, however, where the controversies raged with greater violence, and which was more given to speculation, made no distinction. There the rule of faith with its new elements was also the baptismal confession, which at length assumed a fixed form and acquired regular ecclesiastical sanction, as the Nicene Creed at the Council of Nice, in 325, the bulwark which the Church erected against the assailants of the divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ. The controversies that immediately followed concerning the divinity of the Holy Ghost occasioned the subsequent additions generally ascribed to the Council of Constantinople of the year 381, although in private writings they may be traced 30 years earlier, and their formal adoption was probably later

than the period commonly given. With respect to the final form, the Nicene is older than the Apostles' Creed.

The *Athanasian Creed* is the work, not of the Eastern, but of the Western Church, not of the age of Athanasius, but of some period between the fifth and ninth centuries, the probabilities pointing towards the sixth century. Luther said that he was inclined to think that, since the days of the Apostles, nothing more important and glorious, had ever been written. *It is noted for its concise, sharp, direct method of stating the doctrines of the Trinity and of the mysterious union of the divine and human in the person of Christ, which must forever be an offense to all with whom faith is nothing more than opinion, or who prefer to have the teaching of the Word of God expressed in vague and ambiguous language.*

The Augsburg Confession

For perhaps one thousand years, it was the lot of the Church to confine herself to the learning and appropriating and developing in her life the doctrines of these three Creeds. But as during this long interval, many abuses and errors had become prevalent, against which these Creeds afforded no direct testimony, the time at last arrived for the second period of activity in the formulation of confessions of faith.

It became the duty of the Church to face the evils, to investigate the sources of the corruption, to test by the Word of God prevalent doctrines and customs, and then as a just judge to proclaim the decision and announce the verdict, which, under the guidance of the Holy Ghost, he had reached. Under the same guidance, the documents written for this end were finally elevated to the position of permanent Symbols; although as foreign to the original purpose of most of them, as was the work of the Reformation to Luther on the memorable 31st of October 1517.

A number of volumes have been written, of which Saubert's *Miracula Align stance Confessionis* is a type to show the miraculous interpositions of Divine Providence in the history of the Augsburg Confession. Nor will the theme however often treated, lose its freshness and interest. We trace God's hand in the exalted gifts and special training of the great divines who were engaged in its preparation, and in the fervent piety, undaunted courage and uniform wisdom of the civil rulers (with one exception) and their ministers,

such as the chancellors of Saxony, upon whom the responsibility of the negotiations rested. It was the work of Him who “turneth the king’s heart whithersoever he will,” that opposed to the confident predictions of the enemies of the truth that the Protestant princes would not venture to appear at Augsburg, the firm determination of the Elector of Saxony to proceed thither with all possible promptness, and the happy thought of Chancellor Brück to take advantage of the opportunity, by offering to the diet, to which the theologians had not been summoned, an apology or confession of faith, such as the adherents of the restored Gospel had desired to present before a General Council, whose convocation had been steadily refused. When the theologians at Wittenberg were directed in all haste to prepare the desired documents, it was the same hand that furnished them as the basis of the doctrinal introduction with the well-matured articles, the result of the colloquy at Marburg, carefully revised and farther elaborated for the conference a few weeks later at Schwabach, while the hastily-sketched memoranda known as the *Torgau Articles* concentrate the experience of the entire former lives of the Wittenberg faculty into material which the classical pen of Melancthon was to formulate, frequently with but slight changes of language, into the Articles on Abuses.

What a Providence too there was in the slow progress of the Emperor towards Augsburg, and the delay in the assembling of the diet two months and a half beyond the appointed day, thus affording additional time for the careful preparation and testing of the Confession article by article, and sentence by sentence. What a blessing too in disguise were the 404 articles of the bitter and indefatigable Dr. John Eck, which Melancthon found at an early date in circulation at Augsburg, charging the Reformers with almost all the heresies of the early Church, confusing them with many fanatical teachers for whose erratic course they were not responsible, and rendering necessary a still more ample and explicit statement of the Evangelical faith than had at first been contemplated. Thus the Augsburg Confession became not only a protest against Rome, but also a strong defense against the false spirituality, the arrogant rationalism, the fanatical enthusiasm which under the claim of a common cause with us in our protest against Rome, cherishes errors no less dangerous than those from which the Reformation freed us.

It was a higher power than that of men, which carried to a successful result the protracted negotiations to overcome the Emperor’s resolution not to permit the Confession to be read. What irony too upon merely human

prudence was the result of the plan to limit the hearers of the Confession to the smallest number, by adjourning the diet from the Council-chamber to the chapel of the palace? The proceedings in the spacious Council-chamber are forgotten, while the world for three centuries and a half, knows almost every detail of the appearance as well as of the transactions of the assembly crowded on that eventful Saturday afternoon into the little chapel.

What efforts, after its delivery, were made to suppress the Confession; and how they failed? The original copies were indeed lost, but the numerous editions, published, notwithstanding the imperial prohibition, the very year of its delivery, and culminating in an edition of both the Latin and the German, by Melancthon himself, to say nothing of the translations into Italian and French by the Romanists themselves, rendered these efforts futile. No higher tribute to the worth of this Confession could be given, than the term which in her joy in the possession of this treasure, our Lutheran Church has delighted to call it— "*the Evangelical Apple of the Eye,*" with reference to the passage in Proverbs: "Keep my law, as the apple of thine eye."

Yet to share in this appreciation of the Augsburg Confession, more is needed than attention to the details of the external history. The words of Salig at the second centenary of the Confession are worthy of our attention: "We must go also into the sanctuary of God, and view the agitations of the hearts, and the operations of the Highest in the minds of the first confessors," (and here again we must recognize the divine goodness in preserving to us so much of the extensive correspondence of those days, in which the Reformers so unreservedly record their cares and thoughts, as well as such a wealth of state papers, both of which we find in such works as Bretschneider's *Corpus Reformatorum*, De Wette's edition of Luther's Letters, Feuerlin's *Urkundenbücher*, and the histories of Caelestine, Chrytaeus, Cyprian, Muller and others). "The former," continues Salig, "enriches and extends only our understanding, but the latter likewise touches and edifies the heart. In a watch an inexperienced person regards only the hands, or at most the movement of the wheels; but the skillful workman examines the hidden arrangement whereby the accurate movement of the wheels is determined.

Thus also the external history of the Augsburg Confession and the Diet of Augsburg, may afford little edification, if with it we do not observe *how the spirit and prayer of Luther* gave to all the transactions at Augsburg their

importance. Men always continue to adhere to the mere historical narration, that they may talk thereof. They defend the truth of the doctrine with the greatest zeal, and are right in so doing. But the most forget the true sources the inner impulse imparted by a hidden work, and take no interest in considering the spirit and power of the confessors, and by prayer becoming sharers of the same."

Shall There Be Any Confessions Beyond The Augustana

The question as to whether the testimony of the Evangelical churches, was to be limited to the Augsburg Confession, was answered by the confessors themselves, on the succeeding 10th of July. For among the many devices to counteract and embarrass the truth, this was one adopted by the enemies of the Gospel, and, accordingly, at their advice, the Emperor had asked whether there were anything farther to present—a trap discerned at once by the Evangelical theologians at Augsburg, as well as by Luther himself, when the news of it reached him. Their answer in substance was, that in the Confession, they had endeavored to avoid prolixity, that they had notwithstanding embraced about all necessary articles, and that all other abuses which might exist, beyond those expressly noticed, would be found in conflict with the articles already presented; but that if their opponents would undertake the defense of any abuses, they would be ready to present a farther report from God's Word. While it is not in the power of just any age to frame Confessions, the Church in her work of defending the truth can never reach a point where she can promise to go no farther.

"I have set watchmen upon thy walls, O Jerusalem, which shall never hold their peace day nor night." So far as she herself is concerned, she can rest satisfied with what she already possesses, for it contains all that is absolutely needful for salvation and edification, and furnishes infinite material for development in the life of her members; but the future of her enemies must determine whether or not she is to make a formal statement, still more explicit and furnished with ampler proofs of that which her Confession already teaches. To refuse such an opportunity is often to incur the danger of having even that taken away, that she already hath.

The Apology Of The Augsburg Confession

When then the Romish theologians, offered in reply, a confutation which, although five times worked over, was so notoriously weak and unfair, that for 43 years it was not published in any language, and not until 1808 did the German original appear, and a copy was refused the Evangelical princes, except upon the condition that no attempt would be made to refute it, Melancthon prepared an answer from notes made by some of the Protestant theologians, during the reading of the Confutation, which not being received by the Emperor, was farther elaborated after the adjournment of the diet, and was published as a private writing under the name of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, in April 1531. The Latin text is the standard; the German translation by Dr. Justus Jonas abounds in so many omissions, additions, transpositions and paraphrases, sometimes making important changes not only in sentences, but in entire paragraphs and pages, that the German editions of the Confessions, of Schopf, Koethe, Spieker, and Bodemann, substitute entirely new translations.

Not only did the Apology receive the warmest private commendations, as, for example, that of Luther in 1533 to the Leipsic Christians persecuted by Duke George, "Hold fast to our Confession and Apology;" but at the convention of Schweinfurth in April 1532, became the subject of long negotiations with the royal commissioners, who, as a condition of peace, insisted again upon limiting the Lutherans to the Augsburg Confession, while the Lutheran princes, with ultimate success, after fifteen days perseverance, refused to comply, unless the Apology were also expressly mentioned and recognized; and five years later, in the Smalcald Articles, it was formally approved by the signatures of the Lutheran theologians.

The Apology is more than a mere polemical treatise. It is a thorough discussion, in all its relations, of the cardinal doctrine of Justification by Faith alone, without Works; for whatever be the article treated, the discussion always reverts to this theme. At first reading, it may indeed seem diffuse, but farther study will show that it contains little, if anything, unnecessary, as it is its aim to meet the questions proposed at every turn, and to examine them from varied standpoints.

It abounds in forcible illustrations, in exhaustive treatment of scriptural texts, in proofs from patristic literature and the history of the Church,

overwhelming with confusion the arguments which the adversaries had drawn from the same sources. Its spirit is so mild and conciliatory, its style so clear and lucid, its language so animated and eloquent, its entire mode of reasoning so manifestly the sincere expression of a mind that has been long occupied and deeply agitated by the contemplation of divine things, that it cannot fail to deeply interest all devout students of Scripture.

To him who is charged with the care of souls, the frequent reading of the Apology is invaluable, on account of the manner in which it solves difficulties connected with the most vital points in Christian experience; while the private Christian, although perhaps compelled to pass by some portions, occupied with learned discussions, will find in many, we may say in most parts, what is in fact a book of practical religion, the worthy predecessor of such works as the "*True Christianity*" of John Arndt.

"Of Love and the Fulfilling of the Law

Above all, that remarkable chapter "Of Love and the Fulfilling of the Law," is worthy of being distributed as a tract among our families, of being used as a textbook in our Church-Schools and Bible-classes, as a sequel to the Catechism, and of being placed in the hands of those inquiring the way of life. This chapter, with the preceding more learned and technical one on Justification, from which it has been detached only because of its great length, Philippi regards as bearing to the entire contents of the confessional writings, the same relation that the Epistle to the Romans bears to the entire Scriptures—their "kernel and heart," "so clearly are they grounded in Scripture and experience, so triumphant, edifying and consoling in their development."

If there be one thought more frequently repeated in the Apology than another, it is probably its charge upon the Romish theologians, that their theology is one of doubt, that it can never afford personal assurance of salvation, and that until this assurance be afforded, until we can know that our sins are forgiven, there can be no true peace in life. From the opening chapter on "Original Sin" to the closing one on "Ecclesiastical Power," it not only shows how the Romish doctrine on every article contributes to this doubt, but also sets over against it in clear light the comforting doctrines of the Gospel. It is mightier against its opponents by its positive and extended statements of scriptural doctrine, than even by its forcible direct attacks; for

amidst the ever shifting uncertainties of false or corrupted religions, men long in spiritual things for some firm foundation, some sure footing, upon which to stand, and this the Apology abundantly supplies.

Yet that it would not win its adversaries to the truth, and thus effect a reconciliation, is manifest from the very nature of its treatment. The worldly men who composed the Confutation, and who were the spiritual advisers of the Emperor, could as little understand the arguments founded upon the agony of the soul under the sense of God's wrath, and the necessity for certainty in matters of faith, as the Athenian philosophers on Mar's Hill could accept St. Paul's doctrine of the resurrection from the dead.

Melanchthon and his Romish adversaries lived in different worlds of thought and experience. Just as a tyro in music cannot appreciate the discomfort which his discords occasion a Mozart, so these secure and inexperienced men were amazed to find the vain expedients, which, amidst a life of carelessness in divine things, had been abundantly sufficient for them, rejected and attacked with such ardor—an astonishment which at the present day, is constantly reappearing whenever the Church has sunk into worldliness, and an effort is made to lead her back to the true source of divine life. It has been remarked by Oehler that the Apology, severe towards Rome, but friendly to the Catholic Church as distinguished from Rome, is the true medium between the Augustana, the mild attempt at conciliation, and the Smalcald Articles, the decided document of the complete and remediless breach.

The Smalcald Articles

We must content ourselves with not much more than mentioning the *Smalcald Articles*, prepared in 1537, for a council that was announced, but never held, at Mantua, —the articles proper by Luther, the long and important Appendix, “On the the Power and Primacy of the Pope” and “The Power and Primacy of Bishops” by Melanchthon—a document which among our Lutheran Symbols, contains the only formal attack upon the Papacy as such; and which, beyond reaffirming the Evangelical faith, as on topics of Justification by Faith, Sin, the Law, Repentance, the Gospel, is of especial importance for its farther development of the doctrines of the Church and Ministry. Let him who is inclined to regard the Smalcald

Articles an antiquated document of no especial service at the present day, turn only to the article on Confession, and learn from its exposure of enthusiasm in the Papacy, the warning which it raises against the unevangelical theories of religion with which our day and land are so sorely afflicted, extravagances which under the garb of ultra-Protestantism in reality belong to a subtle, though unconscious Romanism.

The Catechisms

With the Smalcald Articles end the Confessions of the Church in its external relations. The three that follow are devoted to the inner life of the Church. To the Catechisms, next to the Ecumenical Creeds, our oldest Confessions, our attention has recently been called by the occurrence of their seventh semicentennial anniversary. Their origin in the grief of Luther at the wide-spread ignorance and spiritual destitution, which he discovered during his visitation of the churches of Saxony; their gradual growth upon the basis of the plan of instruction which the experience of the Church (as the result of another process of development, beginning in apostolic days with the words of institution of the sacraments, then adding the Creed, then the Lord's Prayer, and ending in the Middle Ages with the Ten Commandments)¹ had found most profitable, and as the ripe fruit gathered by Luther in a number of separate treatises upon the several parts of the Catechism; the expansion of his material beyond the limits originally intended; the completion and publication first of the Large Catechism; the renewed attempt to reduce the substance of God's Word into the briefest compass, and simplest language, resulting in the Small Catechism; its wonderful union of objectivity of treatment with depth of inner subjective personal faith; its unique form, which is in fact that of a conversation between God's Word, and the believing Church regarded as a personality;² its wide reception; its numerous editions; its vast literature; its blessed results — all this belonged to the Jubilee of the Catechisms in 1879.

Our joy in the possession of such a treasure as the Small Catechism should only encourage the Church to the more frequent study and higher appreciation of its more extensive and intensely practical predecessor. But the question may be asked, Why attack symbolical authority to works composed for no polemical purpose, and with little regard to scientific

statement? Our answer is that the Lutheran Church thereby bears witness to the high importance of practical religion, that she presents therein a clear indication of the manner in which the doctrines for which she has made so many sacrifices and fought so many battles should pervade the life, that she hereby declares her remembrance of her Lord's commission in which he made "teaching" the great work of the Church, and that she earnestly proclaims that all the controversies through which she has passed were subordinate to this one great end.

As long as the Book of Concord continues to have symbolical authority, so long will the careful instruction of the children of the Church in the Small Catechism be continued, and the farther aid offered in the Large Catechism to ministers, teachers, heads of families, mature Christians, will not be altogether neglected. Above all our Symbols, even above the Augsburg Confession, does the Lutheran Church attach importance to the Small Catechism. It is the Symbol of the laity. He who has learned its explanations, and found how thoroughly they are supported by Scripture testimony, and is ready to confess them with the mouth, and in the life, is a Lutheran Christian, even though he have never seen another Lutheran Confession, and is ignorant of all else that the Lutheran Church has ever taught. For our other Confessions exist for the sake of the truth therein contained. They are intended only to guard and defend, explain and illustrate what is here condensed into such brief compass. They are the outworks of Lutheranism; this is the citadel. We claim with respect to any one who intelligently and sincerely accepts the Small Catechism, if the opportunity be offered for the more extended study of the other Confessions, in the light of God's Word—especially if some crisis be reached in which the experience of the Church is reproduced in his own inner life, when no longer with eyes he sees not, but following the light that breaks gradually upon him, he is compelled with all the powers of the inner man to struggle for the attainment of a clear apprehension of the articles of faith farther elucidated in our ampler Confessions, that he will find no difficulty beyond what is incidental to every effort of imperfectly renewed men to overcome natural aversion to the truth, in acknowledging them also as correct explanations of Scriptural doctrine.

The duty of the intelligent layman to study the other Confessions, is not thereby diminished; but the only test which the Church requires of him is the Small Catechism, while of her ministers who are the watchmen of God's

heritage, and whose duty it is to learn to descry even afar off the approach of error, and to raise the alarm; who are the regularly appointed teachers of God's Word, and as such should be well-versed in the experience of that Word in all ages of the world, who are expected not only to hold in its purity the faith of the Gospel, but also to give it proper expression, and to guard it against all possible misconception, to afford "sound speech that cannot be condemned," the Church must demand much more; just as in civil life, the standard of qualifications rises, as we ascend from the private citizen to one sufficiently learned in the law to practice in the courts, and from the ordinary counselor to the chief justice of a nation, or, returning to the spiritual sphere, as the Book of Acts and the Pastoral Epistles prescribe special qualifications for office-bearers in the Church, above other members.

The Formula Of Concord

The tercentenary of the preparation of the *Formula of Concord* of 1577, was observed with appropriate ceremonies three years ago. But as it did not appear in print, before its inclusion in the Book of Concord of 1580, 1880 celebrates the tercentenary of its publication. It is the last, but, by no means, the most extensive of the Lutheran Symbols. The Apology is much longer, even when we make no allowance for the fact that the Solid Declaration repeats the Epitome, or speaking with more chronological accuracy, the Epitome is only the reduction of the Solid Declaration to the compass of between a third and fourth, and thus that much matter is repeated.

It is the result of controversies within the Lutheran Church after the breach with the Papacy had become complete. Any other issue than the persistence of error in a subtle form even within the Evangelical churches, and the consequent ultimate necessity of a process of sifting, could not have been expected. If this was the experience of the Apostolic Church, it could not have been otherwise than repeated in that Church which had placed itself upon Apostolic doctrine. It required more than a single generation for the Evangelical faith in all its power, to penetrate the minds and lives of even its staunchest adherents; and when we recall the deplorable condition into which the Church had fallen, and the deep ignorance not only of the people, but also of the ministry, described in the introductions to the

Catechisms, we cannot wonder at the subsequent internal struggles, when the controversy with the Papists absorbed less attention. The revolt, too, against Rome did not in all quarters spring from the same motives, and many thus acted with the Lutheran reformers externally who did not share in their faith, or who if ready to join in its public confession and sincerely accepting it to a certain extent, yet had not reached it by the same process, and with whom it therefore was not a matter of life and death. Political intrigues added their elements of discord, and pressure was brought to bear upon the Church to shape her faith according to the desires of civil rulers for state alliances. Men of amiable temper or desponding hearts, were flattered or terrified into making concessions for the sake of peace, in which while they imagined they were yielding little, they were yielding everything. Such already was the tampering, with the Augustana in the numerous editions of the Variata. Such too was the unfortunate connection of Melanchthon with the Leipsic Interim, which, while pertaining indeed to the controversy with Rome, yet not only shook the confidence of the Church in the judgment of its great theologian, when unsupported by the powerful will and intrepid spirit of Luther, but also became the foundation of many other controversies that followed. For when for the sake of peace men are willing to yield to Rome so far as not only to consent to the reintroduction of all the superstitious ceremonies of the Mass, but even to erase the word alone out of the doctrine of Justification by Faith, we should not be surprised at the readiness, when the pressure from the other extreme was strongest, with which similar concessions to the detriment of sound doctrine were not only proposed, but forced with violence upon the churches. As little, however, as Peter's wavering affected the rock of the confession, upon which Christ builds His Church, does the instability of Melanchthon at this later period, affect the glorious testimony which he penned in the Augsburg Confession, and its Apology. In this great crisis, earnest advocates of the truth were sometimes led in their ardor in confuting error into extreme statements, which when obstinately defended required the censure of the Church, to whom the truth is more precious than even the pure motives of godly, but mistaken men.

With the efforts to settle these controversies before us in the Formula of Concord, prepared in the fear of God, with the greatest care, and after long continued deliberations, and repeated revisions by divines qualified for their work by their acknowledged learning, unblemished character, ripe Christian

experience, and mild and conciliatory spirit—a document for the maturing of which, there were provided with others such men as the judicious and mild Andrea, the devout hymn writer, Selnecker, and Chemnitz, fresh from the irrefutable, yet eminently discreet and kind *Examen Concilii Tridentini*, a greater theologian yet than his revered teacher, Melancthon and the brightest star in the galaxy of our great dogmaticians,— with the Formula of Concord in our hands, where will we find an article that is unnecessary, or a refutation of an error that ought to be erased?

What part of this Confession, should the Lutheran Church be willing to surrender, and leave it optional with her ministers to teach, or to suppress, or to deny, or to attack? What fruit of the bitter experience of the Church in this trial, shall we remove in compliance with the clamors against it? Shall it be the introduction, concerning the only rule and standard according to which all doctrines and teachers are to be judged? Shall we then welcome to our ministry, and recommend to our churches, those who exalt the figment of a mechanical, external succession above the Word, or substitute the vain opinions of men for the everlasting Gospel? Shall we erase from our Confessions the only formal statement of the authority of the Holy Scriptures? Or shall we make the doctrine of Original Sin an open question, express our pity for our fathers in taking such pains in seeking a precise statement of the Scriptural doctrine, and declare that for the sake of saving their children, in this advanced age, the anxiety and annoyance of conflict, it would have been better for them to have allowed men to teach that the work of God is the work of Satan, or on the other hand that natural depravity is not such a fathomless evil, but only a slight external blemish in no way interfering with man's aptitude in spiritual things?

Shall we endorse and send to the congregations which are united into a Synod for the express purpose of mutual protection against error men who are likely to teach such things? Or shall we surrender its denial of the freedom of man's will in spiritual things; its emphatic testimony that conversion and salvation are from first to last the work of God, that the Holy Ghost is present in the means of grace, and that man has the powder to resist his drawings through the Word and Sacraments?

Examine the articles that follow concerning Justification by Faith alone, the Law and the Gospel, and that specially important chapter on the Third Use of the Law, and recalling the history of the controversies in which they originated, and the Scripture proofs on which they rest, and the memory

perhaps of severe inner conflicts on these very subjects, in which the doctrine there presented at length brought light out of darkness, can we say to those whom we entrust with the ministry of the Word: “Gentlemen, on these articles, feel free to believe and teach as you please. They are mere theological problems.”

The Chief Ground of Attack on The Formula

We reach the chief ground of attack upon the Formula in its treatment of the Lord’s Supper. Here it is not only the doctrine treated that is at stake, but with the surrender of the doctrine as here confessed, a principle of Scripture interpretation is settled which would overthrow, with the distinctive doctrines of our Lutheran Church, everything precious in that common Christian faith, which is the support and comfort and quickening power in the lives of multitudes also outside of our communion. Nor does it concern only a principle of interpretation but also the very authority of the written Word, and the abiding presence with it of the Holy Ghost. The difference between the doctrines which came into collision in this controversy, is indicated by the declarations concerning the written Word of their two great champions. “Five, poor, miserable words,”³ said Zwingli concerning the words of institution. And again: “The Church should not build itself upon the word that is spoken, but upon that which inwardly shines in the heart.”⁴

“One little word overthrows him,”⁵ sang Luther. Who that considers the issues here involved, will venture in the least to lower the defenses which are raised from God’s Word in the Formula of Concord? Nor are the concluding articles, the profound treatment of the Person of Christ, which was involved in the controversy concerning the Lord’s Supper, of Church Usages, the new confessional topic of God’s Foreknowledge and Election, or the chapter concerning Factions and Sects, so rich in instruction for our times, in any way to be abated.

Truly we may say of it that it fills a place that none of the other Symbols can fully supply. If the children of our Church had only at all times been mindful of its warnings, and faithfully adhered to its teaching, many sad mistakes and great losses would have been avoided, and the development of the Church in the divinely appointed course would have been more rapid.

Even to the present day, its most bitter assailants are not found among those who have devoted themselves to its study. Some have imbibed

prejudices transmitted in various ways from the persons condemned by it; others have employed, at third or fourth, or tenth hand, dilutions of the acknowledged industrious work of Planck, whom learned critics generally, even those not of our Church⁶ have pronounced unworthy of confidence because of his utter indifference to all matters of doctrine. He is interested in the history of dogmas, as an antiquarian delights in obsolete furniture, and is as incapable of appreciating the Formula of Concord, as the Romish theologians were of comprehending the Augsburg Confession and Apology. He lived in a different world. *There are men whom no amount of evidence will ever constrain to accept the Word of God; much less any of our Symbols.* But as the Papal nuncio Vergerius was won to the truth, by his study of the writings of the Reformers for the purpose of attacking them; so there are many instances where godly men have begun the study of our Confessions, as their enemies, and, by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, have, as they studied, been led to the unprejudiced examination, the hearty reception, and the unfaltering defense of these clear declarations of the faith of God's Word.

For its service (notwithstanding the charges to the contrary against both the Formula of Concord, and the Augsburg Confession) in ultimately bringing comparative peace to a distracted Church; for the new center which it afforded for church unity and firm basis for church activity; for the higher appreciation for sound doctrine, and regard to accuracy in its proper expression which it fostered; for the rich fruit which it ultimately yielded in that wonderful development of Dogmatic Theology, in the XVII. century, to which all who claim to be Protestants are deeply indebted, we are grateful. But our chief delight in it is the fact that it rests upon such firm scriptural foundations; and in this confidence, we hold fast to it, that no man take our crown.

The Book Of Concord

The Book of Concord which comprises these nine creeds collected into one volume, is the successor of a number of similar collections. The 775 folio pages of the German edition (and the Latin is no briefer) of the Corpus Doctrines, which the adherents of the Melancthonian School, in 1559 and '60 raised to Symbolical authority, and forced upon the ministry, in Saxony, under penalty of removal from office, is a sufficient answer to the professed champions of this school, who in later days complain of the extent of the Book of Concord. Instead of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession it contains the Variata, and instead of the two Catechisms and the Smalcald Articles, the 300 folio pages of the Loci Theologici, the Repetition of the Augsburg Confession, the Examen Ordincindorinn, and a Reply to the Bavarian Articles, with a Refutation of Servetus.

Let us rejoice at this our jubilee that the three omitted Symbols, the precious Catechisms, and the Smalcald Articles with their glorious protest against the Papacy, have been preserved to us, as confessions, that minute systems of dogmatics, to say nothing of the changes in the faith they make, have not been adopted as Symbols, and that the text of the Augustana as originally delivered at the diet has been transmitted with such purity, amidst the many dangers which it encountered from the violence or the neglect of its enemies, and the constant alterations of its composer. The most of the other bodies of doctrine are simply the Book of Concord without its final Symbol, accompanied in some cases by other documents, chiefly of local importance; as several countries had each its own separate Body of Doctrine. Here again we rejoice that, in the Book of Concord, these various territorial collections have, to such a degree, given place to one uniform volume of Symbolical Books for the entire Lutheran Church. Even though in a few districts, the earlier collections be still retained, yet wherever the Symbolical Books are mentioned, nothing but the Book of Concord is now understood. Even where there has been no formal endorsement of the Formula of Concord, and no regular ecclesiastical recognition of the Book of Concord, an inner authority springing from the possession of the same faith, binds to it those who accept the earlier Symbols.

There were localities, of which the Scandinavian churches furnish an illustration, where the controversies that agitated the most of the Church were not experienced, and the same need of protection from error was not felt. This explains the late period of its formal reception in Sweden, and the absence, even to the present day, of any official sanction of it in Denmark and Norway. Nevertheless the divines of these churches constantly appeal to it in its completeness as the expression of the true Lutheran faith, defend the doctrines which it teaches, and attack its opponents. We might refer to Rudelbach's *Reformation, Lutherthum und Union* as an illustration in recent times of the devotion of the Church in Denmark to the principles defended in the Formula of Concord. The Preface to the Book of Concord expressly declares not that it is intended for all lands, but "to guard against false doctrines in our provinces and dominions which have been there disseminated." Hence the wisdom of the doctrinal basis enunciated in the Fundamental Principles of Faith and Church Polity of the General Council, where the sincere holding and truthful confessing of the doctrines of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, are declared to be the test of the right of a church to the name Lutheran, while the rest of the Book of Concord is also declared to be in perfect harmony of one and the same scriptural faith.

Thus while there is a careful avoidance of placing too great a burden upon consciences, since a hearty subscription to the Confessions must be Evangelical and not legal, and depends upon the reproduction in the individual of the experience through which the Church has reached these expressions of her faith; yet, where the Confessions themselves are repudiated, and their defense of the faith of the Augsburg Confession, is attacked, it is intimated that there has been some mistake in the profession of firm adherence to the fundamental confession of the Lutheran Church.

The Principle Of Confessional Development

We often hear the complaint made that a wrong has been committed by the sanction in any way, of any Symbol beyond the Augustana. In the very next breath, we perhaps hear from the same source a protest against the folly of binding men, in this advanced age, to documents 300 years old, and the declaration that the life of the Church cannot thus be fossilized. Let these objectors be consistent in their emphasis upon church development, and

they may perhaps be led to proper appreciation of the entire Book of Concord. As long as the Church has life, that life must grow. The growth of the life of the Church, will manifest itself in a growth of the Confession of the Church, (for the Word of God is not bound,) a growth marked not by a destruction of that which in the past was true and had life, or by a cutting loose from the past, but a growth of the life of the past into the life of the future—a growth which in the doctrines of the Church is ever rendering what is general specific, what is indefinite definite, what is implied explicit. So that to him that hath there is given, while to him that hath not is taken away even that which he seemeth to have.

The Large Catechism says that the entire Book of Psalms is a development of the First Commandment, and the growth of the canon of Scripture, under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, manifests the same principle. So in post-apostolic days, inspiration indeed has ceased, but the working of the Holy Ghost through Word and Sacraments, and through the Word reproduced, made incarnate, in the experience of each individual believer has not ceased. The true Christian experience of the past, is extended, and deepened, by the believing study, acceptance, application and confession of God's Word by his children of every generation. But as it is conditioned by the thorough appropriation and assimilation, on the part of a large portion of the Church, of what has already become confessional, its progress, except at rare periods when all the energies of an age seem concentrated, on matters of doctrine, is necessarily slow. Although, therefore, the Church, in her confessional developments, has, by no means, fathomed the depths of God's Word, yet, as a thousand years intervened between the Athanasian Creed and the Augustana, we need not expect in the near future any farther increase of our Confession.

The attempt to add to the Book of Concord at its first Jubilee in 1680, the *Consensus Repetitus* signally failed, as the errors pertaining to the controversies of those days are rebuked with sufficient distinctness in what the Church already possessed, to say nothing of the comparatively limited sphere which they occupied. The attempt to add to the Confessions of the Church before the proper time may be as true an indication of a superficial acquaintance with them, as the error, on the opposite side, which would take from them. Meanwhile it is our duty and exalted privilege to faithfully protest, diligently study and clearly confess what we have already attained.

As we look back on this Jubilee, let us thank God for his goodness to our Church in this country, since the preceding Jubilee of the Augsburg Confession, in awakening a new interest in these Confessions, and in raising up so many witnesses to their faith. Let us thank him for the institutions that have been founded, and the literature that has been published, and the church-life which is already responding to these efforts. Let us show our confidence in the truth of our cause, by applying ourselves with increased energy, not only to the work of making this faith more and more our own, but also to that of diffusing it still farther, of developing by it the life of our congregations, of leading to it all the erring and widely scattered children of our Church in this land, of commending it, as the pure Gospel, to all who bear the Christian name, of strengthening the institutions in which it is taught, of encouraging and extending the literature by which it is explained and defended, and of preserving and handing it down uncorrupted as a precious legacy to generations yet unborn. If we really believe it to be the very truth of God, what efforts, what sacrifices for its study and defense and diffusion, will be too great?

When one of the princes who participated in the diet where our Confession was read, John Frederick, the Magnanimous, Elector of Saxony, during his five years imprisonment after the battle of Mühlberg, in which he suffered the loss of all things for Christ's sake, was burdened with increasing hardships because of his steadfast refusal to sanction the Augsburg Interim, which he affirmed that he could not approve, without denying the Augsburg Confession, and with it God's Word, as an additional measure to break his firmness, his books, including his Bible and some of Luther's works, were taken from him. But his heroic answer was: "You may take away those books, but you can never take from my heart what those books have taught me." May our study of the Book of Concord be so blest, that its words may be to us such an abiding treasure, indelibly written upon our hearts so that we too may overcome by the blood of the Lamb, and the Word of his testimony.

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1. Von Zezschwitz, *System der Katechetik*. I., 544 sqq.; II., 52 sqq. ←
 2. Ehrenfeuchter, *Geschichte des Katecliismus*, p. 15. ←

3. Denn auch der Zwingli an einem Art gleich zornig über uns ist, und spricht: Wir hatten so gar fest über fünf arme und elende Wort * * * Aber mit solcher Rede zeugen sie wider sich selbst, was sie für einen Geist haben und wie theuer sie Gottes Wort achten, dass sie dieselbigen theuren Wort schelten, als arme, elende fünf Wort, das ist, sie glauben nicht, dass Gottes Wort sind. Denn wo sie glaubten, dass Gottes Wort waren, wurden sie es nicht elende arme Wort heissen, sondern auch einen Tutel und Buchstaben grosser achten, denn die ganze Welt.— Luther's Grosse Bekenntniss von Abendmahl', Erl. Ed. Werke, xxx., 305.↵
4. Zwingli's, Commentary De vera et Falsa Religione (Opp. Schuler and Schultess, Vol. III., p. 1.) p. 138, quoted in Rudelbach's Reformation, Lutherthum und Union, p. 121.↵
5. Ein wörtlein Kann ihn fallen.↵
6. See e. g. Schaff's Apostolic Church, pp. 76, 77; Dorner's History of Protestant Theology, 2:283: "The author's own doctrinal indifference is transferred to the agents of the dogma-forming process, by the axiomatic assumption that doctrine alone would have been incapable of exciting so much interest or contention. In his eyes doctrine is an antiquated matter, which is properly destined to oblivion."↵

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Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy, To the only wise God our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen. (Jude 1:24-25)

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