

A Truly Lutheran Confession

What is a Lutheran? That's a question that, I fear, a great many Lutherans cannot answer today. And a great many more may think of Lutherans as a church body that wants to cut itself off from other Christians.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Lutherans want to be united with other Christians, but we want that unity to be defined in Christ, in the Gospel, in the Scriptures, not by church politics or cultural opinions. And, not quite 500 years ago, some of our Lutheran forefathers met with the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, to say just that. In a German city called Augsburg, Lutheran princes and theologians presented our Confession of faith in a document we now call *The Augsburg Confession*.

Emperor Charles was struggling to unite his empire against the Turks, who threatened his southern border. He also wanted to quell the growing religious disturbance in Germany that had been started by Martin Luther. Hoping to deal with all this in a peaceful manner, he summoned all the parties to Augsburg for an official Imperial meeting.

Though Luther couldn't be at Augsburg, (he was still under the ban and could be arrested and executed on sight), he gave what advice he could from nearby Coburg Castle. Working from previous documents, a group of reformers composed the final document that was read to the Emperor on Saturday afternoon, June 25, 1530.

The *Augsburg Confession* consists of 28 articles. The first twenty-one summarize Lutheran teaching, while the last seven address abuses that had crept into the Church. It was an official statement, addressed to Charles V and signed by dukes and princes, who governed territories in the Holy Roman Empire. Its tone is very mild, seeking unity according to the Gospel while sacrificing nothing of what Scripture teaches.

The core of the Augsburg Confession was also the battleground issue of the Reformation: Justification. As Article IV states: "Our churches teach that people cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works. People are freely justified for Christ's sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake. By His death, Christ made satisfaction for our sins. God counts this faith for righteousness in His sight (Romans 3 and 4)."

"Although the Augsburg Confession is not a complete system of doctrine, it does set forth the fundamental teachings in which the Gospel comes to expression. And although it bears the marks of the particular times that occasioned its formulation, its teachings have been found, by untold numbers of Christian believers over a period of more than 400 years, to be a faithful exposition of the basic Gospel. It is for this reason that the Lutheran Church requires of those who are to teach in its congregations and theological schools a declaration that they will adhere to the doctrines taught in the Augsburg Confession. This is not an effort to curb the free activity of the Holy Spirit but a means of keeping the church's preaching and teaching in harmony with the Gospel itself" (*The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church*, s.v "Augsburg Confession," Volume 1, 141-142).

On Sunday, June 25th of this year, we will remember the Presentation of the Augsburg Confession as part of our Reformation 500 celebrations. Join us! And read the *Augsburg Confession* for yourself. Ask me for a copy, or go to www.lcms.org/lutheranconfessions, and rejoice in the clear proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ!