

2014

What Kind of Confession is the Augsburg Confession?: "I Shall Speak of Your Decrees Before Kings, and Shall Not be Put to Shame" (Psalm 119:46)

Steven D. Paulson
Luther Seminary, spaulson@luthersem.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty_articles

 Part of the [Christian Denominations and Sects Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), [History of Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Paulson, Steven D., "What Kind of Confession is the Augsburg Confession?: 'I Shall Speak of Your Decrees Before Kings, and Shall Not be Put to Shame' (Psalm 119:46)" (2014). *Faculty Publications*. 56.
http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty_articles/56

Published Citation

Paulson, Steven D. "What kind of confession is the Augsburg Confession?: 'I will also speak of your decrees before kings, and shall not be put to shame' (Psalm 119:46)." *Neue Zeitschrift Für Systematische Theologie Und Religionsphilosophie* 56, no. 1 (2014 2014): 12-34.

Steven D. Paulson

What Kind of Confession is the Augsburg Confession?

“I will also speak of your decrees before kings, and shall not be put to shame” (Psalm 119:46)

Summary: What is the genre of the Augsburg Confession? Knowing this identifies the meaning and use of the document historically and presently. The confession is apocalyptic, despite the disparaging place this genre has held in recent theology. The case comes especially from Martin Luther’s own correspondence of the time and his later recollection of the events given in his 1542 Genesis lectures. In the Genesis lectures Luther connected Augsburg to the conflict Rebecca had come to in the case of primogeniture and Jacob. The first table of the commandments came into strange conflict with the second: the law of authority conflicting with the *promissio* that makes faith. That is apocalypse, the conflict of the law and gospel. This had happened to him, Luther judged, in the 1518 questioning before Cardinal Cajetan. It happened again for the whole evangelical cause in 1530 at Augsburg, and led the Confessors to take up Psalm 119 as their prescript in its overt apocalyptic language: “we speak of your decrees before kings, and shall not be put to shame.” The remaining argument uses three of Luther’s letters written from Coburg immediately prior to and following the presentation of the Confession 1530 to Melanchthon (June 29), Spalatin (June 30) and Cordatus (July 6). It is a theological argument made in the letter that speaks of the Confession as a public sermon used as an instrument of the Holy Spirit for the creation of true church *ex nihilo*. Thus the genre of the CA is not only apocalyptic, but also the specific proclamation that distinguishes law and gospel. The CA is a sermon that regards and reckons only faith as righteousness in God’s sight. The proclamation of the Confession meant this divine word became a deed – God’s own cosmic courthouse, thus transferring the Reformation from Luther’s person, to the public when the thing was proclaimed literally to kings and the end – and new beginning – arrived in proclamation.

Zusammenfassung: Welche Gattung hat die *Confessio Augustana*? Dieses Wissen identifiziert die historische und gegenwärtige Bedeutung und Verwendung des Dokuments. Die *Confessio* ist apokalytisch, unabhängig von der Geringschätzung dieser Gattung in der gegenwärtigen Theologie. Der Grund hierfür

liegt vor allem in Martin Luthers eigener Korrespondenz und seiner späteren Erinnerung an die Ereignisse, die Gegenstand seiner 1542 gehaltenen Genesis Vorlesungen sind. In den Genesis Vorlesungen verbindet Luther Augsburg mit dem Konflikt von Rebecca bezüglich Jakob und des Erstgeborenen. Die erste Gesetzestafel kam in einen komischen Konflikt mit der Zweiten: das Gesetz der Autorität liegt im Streit mit der *promissio*, die Glauben macht. Das ist Apokalypse, der Konflikt von Gesetz und Evangelium. Nach Luthers Urteil ist ihm eben jener in der Anhörung vor Kardinal Cajetan widerfahren. Er ereignete sich ein weiteres Mal für das gesamte protestantische Anliegen 1530 in Augsburg und ließ die Bekenner Psalm 119 aufgrund seiner offenkundig apokalyptischen Sprache Bezug nehmen: „Vor Königen wollen wir reden von deinen Zeugnissen und uns nicht schämen.“ Das verbleibende Argument verwendet drei Briefe Luthers aus Coburg unmittelbar vor und nach der Präsentation des Bekenntnisses 1530 geschrieben an Melancthon (29. Juni), Spalatin (30. Juni) und Cordatus (6. Juli). Es ist ein theologisches Argument in dem Brief, das von der *Confessio* als öffentliche Predigt, die als Instrument des Heiligen Geistes die Schöpfung der wahren Kirche *ex nihilo* wirkt, spricht. Somit ist nicht nur die Gattung der CA apokalyptisch, sondern auch deren spezifische Verkündigung, die Gesetz und Evangelium unterscheidet. Die CA ist eine Predigt, die ausschließlich den Glauben als Gerechtigkeit anerkennt. Die Verkündigung der *Confessio* bedeutete, dass das göttliche Wort zur Tat wurde – Gottes eigener kosmischer Gerichtshof. Die Reformation wurde also von Luthers Person auf die Öffentlichkeit übertragen, als die *Confessio* buchstäblich Königen verkündet wurde und so das Ende – und der neue Anfang – in der Verkündigung kamen.

Steven D. Paulson: 2481 Como Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55108, USA,
E-Mail: spaulson@luthersem.edu

There has long been a dispute over the genre of the Augsburg Confession. The controversy is more than a literary contrivance; indeed, the question of precisely what sort of confession the Augsburg Confession is (*Confessio Augustana* hereafter CA) affects all aspects of the current use and teaching of this document. As a teacher of the Lutheran Confessions it has become increasingly clear to me over the years that the CA's proper genre has been systematically suppressed despite the good intentions of its practitioners. So what kind of confession is it? Two options are normally considered possible. One is a political/theological confession that established a new church, even if this institution was not the original intention of the confessors at Augsburg in 1530. The argument

for this case has fallen on hard times today as confessionalization, or denominationalism. In that case, the CA is exhibited as the first of many such documents in the fracturing of Christendom by the political/theological process that produced a series of Protestant brands, each of which defined themselves in opposition to the Catholic Church and against each other. It is hard to embrace the Lutheran confession on this basis. Instead the document is often blamed for schism, and the document becomes at best an historical artifact to be surmounted on the way to uniting of the various “European Reformations.”

The second option is to say that the CA is a truly catholic confession whose case pleads that the evangelical teaching is no different than that of the church in every time and place, except for removing relatively recent abuses like penance, and perhaps offering a dogmatic proposal concerning undecided matters of grace. In that case, the rejection of the CA by Rome, and other Protestants, is deemed an unfortunate accident that nevertheless retains hope that the document would be recognized as the mission statement of a reforming movement within the Catholic Church. Espousing the CA in this manner is then a strategy for taking leave of the document as soon as the true Catholic Church receives the reforming impulse in the same way that a catalyst disappears when the proper chemicals have mixed. This confession then becomes a momentary aid or nuisance in a controverted church whose goal is to discard the CA as soon as it has served its temporary task in the great progress to true church unity.

Each of these genres has a truth regarding the CA, but they both lack the passion of the original Confession and cannot communicate why anyone would bother making this public confession today, since its use is counterproductive either by perpetuating schism among denominations or arresting the necessary development of the united Church. What has not been said in the debates over genre, since it is a fearful thing, is that the Confession is apocalyptic. This is the proposal made here, so that we can again sense the urgency and the abiding use of the Augsburg Confession, a Confession which should not disappear for the sake of church unity, but emerge more fully as true confession of faith in every time and place – precisely because, not despite, its apocalyptic in-breaking.

I The exception, not the rule

In using the word “apocalyptic” I am aware of the caution of Gerhard Ebeling against using this word, with preference for “eschatological.” But I want to reclaim the proper use of apocalyptic in relation to the CA. Take, for example,

Luther's recollection of the events of Augsburg for his students in the middle of the Genesis lectures of 1542. Luther had come upon one of Scripture's most important and difficult words that both Malachi (1:3) and Paul (Romans 9:11) used as a summary of Genesis 27: "Esau I hated, Jacob I loved." In this case not only do we have to do with God's final judgment or predestination, but Luther took up with his students the thorny question of the righteousness of Rebecca's lie in order to transfer primogeniture from Esau to Jacob. How can such a saint as Rebecca do this way? Luther paused in his exegesis to recall to his students how it was that he and the other evangelicals went against the authority of emperor and pope "without any preceding legal hubbub."¹ That means without any proper legal declamation, and in apparent disobedience to the command of God. How, indeed, did they come to oppose what is a clear command to obey authority, especially that of Emperor and Pope? After all, Luther himself had taught in his Small Catechism, just prior to the Augsburg Diet, that obedience to "others in authority" was embedded in the fourth commandment that demanded honor of father and mother. Furthermore, he admitted that the evangelical theologians had not been able to make a public case against the papacy, despite many calls for a full church council: "We made no charges against the pope. Nor could we do so, for there was no judge."² But then again, how could there be a judge for this cause on earth when it came to the basic distinction between law and gospel? Could the emperor or Pope serve in this judicial capacity when they were themselves being called as defendants at Augsburg to make public confession of their failure to rightly distinguish these two words? Moreover, the only possible judge on a matter so fundamental, so basic as the Gospel itself, was Jesus Christ, whom Luther argued had already spoken to him and others by means of a true preacher by the time of the Diet of Augsburg in 1530: "My sheep hear my voice; a stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him" (John 10:27,5). This was no fanatic's claim. It meant that Christ said something that changed everything for everyone, and Luther was the one who had first heard it. Politics could not wait when he got his preacher. What he received was an external word of promise (*promissio*) given freely to him and all sinners through the means of baptism, the Lord's Supper, the absolution and the public sermon: *I forgive you*. Once he received this voice through the external proclamation of the word, Luther immediately fled from all other authorities, no matter how exalted, and then he exhorted his students, "you must do the same." Moments like this do not come along every day.

¹ AE 5, 115 from WA 43 *Genesisvorlesung* 1538/4243 s. 507.33–4: *sine praecedente strepitu iuris*.

² *Ibid.*, *Non accusavimus Papam, nec potuimus: quia nullus erat Iudex*.

So, to explain what happened to him and the whole evangelical cause at the time of the Augsburg Confession, Luther used Rebecca's lie to Isaac at the ceremonial bestowing of her husband's blessing of primogeniture. This connection between Rebecca and the CA helps to understand what apocalyptic means in relation to the preached word of God. What was Rebecca, one of God's notable saints, doing when she taught Jacob how to secure the blessings against his father's own wishes? Rebecca indeed lied and told her second son to do the same, tricking Isaac into bestowing the words of his final testament upon Jacob rather than Esau. Yet, how could such a lie be righteous? It could not be on its own merits, unless one made the audacious distinction between obeying *God* and obeying the *law*. Rebecca told a lie to Isaac in direct opposition to the law of primogeniture that demanded the blessings and estate be given to Esau, the first born. But she was faced with a strange situation that Luther later called "heroic," in which faith and obedience to the law must part ways.³ The rule gave the estate to Esau, but the exception gave it to Jacob. And when the exception is a word of promise, apart from (and even in opposition to) the law, it is the exception that must be followed, not the rule. She had long before been promised, "the elder will serve the younger" before the birth of her twins, and faith always follows a promise, even when it departs from the rule and law. As a matter of fact, faith always ultimately departs from the law when it gets a promise of its own. So, "for now she is not obeying the rule or the law," said Luther, "No, she is obeying God who transfers and dispenses contrary to the rule. Therefore she did not sin."⁴

Luther taught that the rule of the second table always holds in life, that one is to honor parents and others in authority. But if this rule strangely comes into conflict with the first table of commandments, by which faith in God's word alone matters, then the second table (respect for authority) must submit to the first (trust in the promise). The rule must submit to the exception. The law must be abrogated in favor of the promise once the promise has arrived. And the promise always comes in this particular way, as an exception that overrides everything – as a true apocalypse. So it was that even emperor and pope must be left behind in favor of a promise, which came disruptively when Luther heard Christ's simple absolution: "I forgive you," spoken by a priest to a sinner.

3 WA 43, s. 640.40–1, 641.1–3. *Respondeo: Alia exempla sunt heroica, alia moralia. Leges et mores simpliciter sunt servandi, nec ferenda est ulla transgressio, ne fiat confusio. Heroica exempla sunt, quae non congruunt cum legibus. Saepe enim vir heroicus, quem Deus singulari numine adflavit, perumpit et frangit regulam. Sed non relinquit post se exemplum.*

4 AE 5, 114 from WA 43, s. 506.31–2: *quia obedit iam non regulae, vel legi, sed Deo transferenti et dispensanti contra regulam: Ideo non peccavit.*

That was the voice of the shepherd, and no judge could overrule it. Once this happens, Luther pointed out, and one has learned God's will as it speaks precisely outside the law, there "there must be no debating about rights, rules, or the like, but God's command must be obeyed without any deliberation, for neither the pope nor the parents nor the emperor have this title: 'I am the Lord your God.' That is the First Table. Just as in Rebecca's case, the law and the rule ordained that Esau was the first-born; but God, with His First Table, made the transfer."⁵

These moments in the lives of people do not come often, as when Abraham was to sacrifice Isaac, or when Jacob was to receive the estate instead of Esau, but Luther himself had strangely reached this point by 1518 and the examination before Cardinal Cajetan. Even more remarkably, the rest of the evangelicals had arrived at such a point with the Diet of Augsburg and the publication of the Augsburg Confession in 1530. To grasp how it was that the first table and the second table came into conflict there, and so how faith could not wait for decisions reached in human fashion, we have to consider our question, what sort of confession is the Augsburg Confession? What is this Confession's genre? The classification is crucial, since moments like Rebecca's fabricated lie to Isaac (in obedience to God's promise) do not come often, and when they arrive, they break in with a final word that is apocalyptic, bringing a new cosmos. Yet, as rare as these events are, those of us who join in confessing the Augsburg Confession want to convey why this is not one more legal document that we subscribe to, or one more theological tract that we may be influenced by in the compilation of our dogmatics, but is definitive in its historical particularity, and precisely so is worthy of having people join in making this very confession long after the events of 1530. It was this reception and use of the CA at its publication that led the reformers to take up Psalm 119 as their prescript in its overt apocalyptic language: "we speak of your decrees before kings, and shall not be put to shame."

II Theological Appraisal

For the purposes of this writing, I intend to identify the apocalyptic genre of the CA using three of Luther's letters written from Coburg immediately prior to and following the presentation of the Confession 1530 to Melanchthon (June 29),

⁵ WA 43, s. 508.3–4: *Sed Deus cum sua prima tabula fecit translationem, imo mutavit illam legem, et sic decrevit: Esau nolui: Iacob volui.*

Spalatin (June 30) and Cordatus (July 6). These tell us exactly why Luther was so pleased to have lived to what he called “this moment.” Speaking of the apocalypse is, of course, ruled out by the standard rules of historical, critical interpretation, since those rules know no end to the law. In fact that rule is what makes critical interpretation so effective, and yet limited, precisely when it comes to the accidental, historical event of public proclamation in the present “moment.” In teaching the Augsburg Confession it makes sense that we would take into account the single most influential assessment of the Confession over time, which is Luther’s own. It may seem ironic, but is part of the record, that Luther nevertheless refused to have his opinion of the Confession be determinative, even while Melancthon eagerly sought it. Luther is the one who rejected what we today would call authorial intent, and also rejected his own opinion expressed at the time of the Diet of Augsburg as decisive. That sounds very modern, and so today we are amenable to such humility along with the consequent resistance to a single person’s interpretation of a document like the CA. But that which does not sound modern is what really mattered to Luther: The way God himself viewed the confession. Who dares to speak for that? Only one with *certain* faith. But in that case, Luther then appears to leap from humility to unwarranted pride, and with this he seems objectionably un-modern. But Luther is clear about the need for theological appraisal of the document that is not limited to the legal, or even our presently preferred “social,” analysis. Theologically Luther sought the appraisal of God instead of one or another human point of view – including his own. Of course this seems impossible to us who have been convinced by the likes of Kant that such knowledge is beyond our human limits. But what is impossible with a God who is not preached (where Kant is perfectly correct), becomes available to humans precisely when God is preached. It is this preached God to whom Luther finally refers for assurance of the use and genre of the CA.

Such theological appraisal does not exclude all the other modes of assessment, historical, political, social and psychological, yet it does provide the necessary limits to these by marking the central matter what is available by faith alone, not by reason. For the makers of this Confession this central theological matter is clear: In Christ crucified, the law is not only fulfilled, but comes to an end (Romans 10:4), that is we are justified by faith alone through the means of the office of proclamation. It is the Holy Spirit’s office of proclamation that gives us access to what otherwise is impossible for sinners, and which is thus the vehicle of the apocalypse that ends the old and marks the beginning of the new creation. The end of the old and beginning of the new comes unexpectedly in the middle of reason’s rules of history, when its goal is yet unreachd, and must be experienced as an unwelcome interruption or exception to the rule.

III Gospel Confession Before Kings: No longer just a word, but a work

As usual, Luther used Scripture to identify the CA in his letter to Cordatus 6 July 1530, and sealed the matter of the prescript for the document: “I will speak of your testimonies in the presence of kings, and shall not be put to shame” (Psalm 119:46).⁶ This Psalm emerged since it concerns the interpretation of God’s word in Scripture, and therefore the distinction of the law and the gospel at the heart of evangelical preaching. It is also the proper location for Luther’s great teaching on *tentatio*, as an attack by God on a true preacher and faith. The other Confessors agreed with Luther that the public proclamation of the CA became the fulfillment of Scripture itself so that Psalm 119 became the title of the Confession in its first Latin printing. History, as we know, is not simple a series of events which present themselves positively, they are interpreted contentiously. History is exegetical. Much like the great, later success of Matthias Flacius Illyricus in naming Melancthon’s secret compromise “The Leipzig Interim,” Luther was the one who named what happened at Augsburg a *Confession before Kings* that elevated the document from mere political compromise, or a doctrinal negotiation on the meaning of grace, or even a presentation of the evangelical position to the church, into that of a divine work on sinners. That makes the confession truly theological. The Confession of Augsburg concerns God’s final judgment in a public proclamation used as an instrument of the Holy Spirit for the creation of true church *ex nihilo*. As with any sermon, it seeks the hearing of those most ardently opposed, even kings and popes. Despite being rejected by the Empire and Rome, its confessors clung to a promise that in the end, (i.e., in the final judgment before God), they would not be put to shame who are not ashamed of the Gospel. As with any eschatological claim, this confession is either the ranting of fanatics or the true word of God in Scripture itself, delivered in space and time by a true preacher.

After all, what is a confession in any case? A confession comes from one who is about to die. Indeed, a Christian (theological) confession comes from one who has already died: “For I through the law died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ” (Galatians 2:19). The freedom of confession is to be already delivered from “the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father” (Galatians 1:4). This is what we mean by properly apocalyptic. This kind of confession springs from the Gospel, not the

6 WA Br 5 no. 1626 s. 441–442.

Law. Giving up that freedom of the Gospel under the pressure of kings or the devil himself is far worse than what they can do to the flesh: “Far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ by which the cosmos has been crucified to me and I to the cosmos” (Galatians 6:14). This is the eschatological situation of confession, and so it is no mere rhetorical expression that Paul used at the end of his letter when he said the whole cosmos is crucified, and he to it. The apocalyptic language is not a mere flourish, but is the substance of the words and letter. As long as Christians continue in this old world they come under attack, not only from those who hate the church, but those in the *permixta* church on earth (CA VIII) who are “false brethren secretly brought in, who slipped in to spy out our freedom which we have in Christ Jesus that they might bring us into bondage” (Galatians 2:4). Of course this is contentious language, no less when Paul used it than when the confessors at Augsburg, or Luther in his supporting letters, did. Nevertheless, confession before tribunals of the world – ultimate or final judgment – is the normal situation for a child of God, freed by Christ’s crucifixion. Such Christian confessors do not fear being wrong about their final matters since they have nothing left to lose. Otherwise they would, “nullify the grace of God; for if justification were through the law, then Christ died in vain” (Galatians 2:22). Once the Gospel has come to release a person from the judgment of the law, there is no hesitation or going back to a time before this end. When suffering comes to preachers, when the cause of justification by faith alone apart from works of the law seems to be in danger, then all of Scripture ceases being *mere words* and becomes what Luther called *worked* – fulfilled not just in God but in us. The word is an accomplished thing, not merely an idea. So Luther wrote to Melanchthon 29 June 1530 only days after the apparent defeat of the CA: “One has to suffer if he wants to possess Christ [?.] it is written: ‘Through many tribulations,’ etc.? *This is no longer just a word; it has arrived in work*, and we should act accordingly.”⁷

How does one act or live when the work of God has arrived? Luther described the strange situation that had come upon the cause of the Augsburg Confession in an hilarious letter (since laughter is one of two eschatological tools to fight against the Devil) to Spalatin at the moment of highest anxiety for evangelicals who feared for their flocks and perhaps their own lives. What would become of them? Luther’s opening lines are in the form of a comic play on his own childish impatience wanting to hear word from his friends of the

7 WA Br 5, no. 1609 s. 406.37–40. “Es will gelitten sein, wer den Christum haben will. Pacile esset et nobis regnare si vellemus eum negare et criminari. Es heißet Anmerkung ansehen: Per multas tribulationes etc. *Das sind nu nicht mehr Wort, sondern ist ins Werk komen.*” My translation and italics.

proclamation of the Confession. Each person bearing letters to his door was thus interrogated:

“Have you letters?”

“No.”

“Have you word of my friends?”

“Fine.”

“Nothing else?”

“Nothing else.”⁸

Luther recounted the many iterations of this comic scene of him interrogating everyone at his door, one after another, and laughed playfully at himself (and the devil), since he had literally written the book on how all of life is hope, and hope is waiting to see what is held in faith. Nevertheless he chomped at the bit, waiting upon every little word of the events at the Diet, in the midst of the final cosmic battle, including the looks on the faces of the people and the kings at the moment the thing was preached, thus becoming an accomplished deed.

IV That the cause of faith he not without faith

Then Luther stepped back and imagined the cosmic significance of the CA as a fulfillment of Psalm 2, and the great battle fought by God himself against all enemies:

That [at Augsburg] kings, sovereigns, and people are raging and howling against the Anointed of the Lord I consider to be a good sign, and much better than if they were flattering. For it follows: ‘He who sits in the heavens laughs at them.’ [Ps.2] Since our Sovereign laughs at them, I do not see why we should shed tears in their presence. For he doesn’t laugh on his own behalf, but on our behalf, so that we, too, may laugh more courageously at their ineffectual plans. Only faith is necessary that the cause of faith be not without faith.⁹

⁸ WA Br.5 no. 1612, s. 414.8–17: *Vbi venit is nuntius Apelli, solius Ionę literas Wittembergam ferens interrogatus: Bringstu nicht brieffe? R[espondit]: Nein. Wie gehets denn Herrn? R: Wol. Hoc vnum mox questus sum Philippo. Postea venit nuntius eques ad Torgam missus, mihi ab ipso Principe literas ferens, Interrogatus: Bringestu nicht brieffe? R: Nein. Wie gehets denn den HERRn? R: Wol. Deinde vectura cum ferina hiñc abeunte, iterum scripsi Philippo; Ea rediit similiter inanis. Hic cepi cogitare tristia, suspicans, vos aliquid mali me celare velle. Venit Quarto Jobst Nympzteñ. Bringstu brieffe? Nein. Wie gehets denn HERRn? Wol.*

⁹ LW 49, 336–7, translation altered. WA Br. 5, no. 1612 s. 414.26–30: *Furere istic & fremere reges, principes, populos aduersus Christum Domini, felix omen puto, ac multo melius, quam si blandirentur. Sequitur enim: ‘Qui habitat in cęlis, ridet eos’. Hoc autem principe nostro illos ridente, non*

The fact that this confession is apocalyptic means it is a work of God. That is not a grandiose, psychological or rhetorical observation. It is a properly theological assertion. God arranges things in this world so that Scripture is fulfilled, and so *faith*, not some human attribute or power, would in fact emerge. The Lutheran confession is the cause of that faith. This is Luther's bedrock assertion, that God arranges things in this world so that scripture is fulfilled that *faith alone* saves, not some human attribute or power. Since no human can make faith in Christ's word, the Holy Spirit must create it. To do this God must have the word preached, and preachers must suffer for it. They must have glory removed from them – precisely so that it is faith (and not sight) that emerges from the battle. God's cause is not reason or law, it is faith alone. Faith, however, is not a power emerging from the human, it is a creation of the Holy Spirit by means of a preached, external promise to which faith clings.

The *cause* of faith proclaimed in the CA cannot *be without faith*, as Paul says, "Out of faith, into faith" (Romans 1:17). This is the evangelical breakthrough in a nutshell. Faith is a destruction of the old and a new creation of the Holy Spirit by means of a preached, external promise to which faith clings. Admittedly this is a strange theological truth that is not only unapparent to reason, but opposes reason, not in the form of irrationality, but in the form of the cross. For this purpose the fundamental theological distinction must be made, and Luther clearly makes it in his letters at this time, between God preached and not preached. God must hide a first time without any preaching so he is not found in the legal form of victory and glory and thus treated as if God could be found by means of a work of law. Then God hides a second time *sub contrario* in the cross of Christ in order to take upon Him the sin of the world. The strangeness does not end there. God hides a third time in the scorned promise of a preacher where he wants to be found not in Himself, but in you, the sinner. It is this last that the Augsburg Confession especially concerns by identifying the preaching office as *the* instrument of the Holy Spirit (CA V) overagainst all fanaticism either of the evangelical or Roman type. This is an exclusive claim, as all apocalyptic claims are.

V Human Traditions and the Word of God

The rejection of the Augsburg Confession in the days that followed the public proclamation on June 25, 1530 became the fulfillment of the curse of God's

video, cur nobis flendum sit a facie eorum. Ridet enim non sui, sed nostri gratia, ut & nos potius fidentes rideamus inania eorum consilia. Tantum est opus fide, ne Causa fidei sit causa sine fide.

laugh in Psalm 2, but it also delivered the long-awaited promise of Psalm 119:46 “I will also speak of your decrees before kings, and shall not be put to shame.” Both words, curse and blessing, had arrived in their fullness at that moment. The week before Luther drew this conclusion in his letter to Cordatus 6 July, Luther had already begun to give Master Philip *seelsorge*, assuring his colleague’s faith. Luther wrote these letters in the week around the proclamation of the CA when Melancthon, Spalatin and Cordatus were worrying that the Confession would fail in its plan for unity in Christendom, for the preservation of the evangelical teaching in Germany, and for clarifying the true teaching of Scripture so that troubled consciences everywhere would receive freedom. Melancthon especially had much to worry about! But Luther assured him that God is *hidden in darkness* (“*er wolle im Dunkel wohnen*” 1 Kings 8:12). Why? Not to destroy faith, but so that the new *locus* of the gospel would in fact triumph, not in this world but in Christ’s new cosmos – God made faith in Christ crucified where before there was only worry, earthly politics, and the endless game of domination of the powerless by the powerful.

We belittle the Augsburg Confession when we think of it merely in human or false spiritual terms as the manifesto of a Reformation movement, or the charter and constitution of a new church. But neither is the CA another in a line of catholic confessions, as if it served only to prove to Rome that it taught nothing new, or that nothing it said about grace should be disagreed with by the universal church. How true that is! But that goal failed in 1530, and continues to fail despite occasional efforts to reignite interest among Catholics to “recognize” the Augsburg Confession.¹⁰ In America the premier text for teaching the Augsburg Confession until the English translation of Leif Grane’s *The Augsburg Confession*, reduced the Augsburg Confession to «an ecumenical proposal of dogma,” as if it were making a humble contribution to the ongoing spirit-led development of dogma in the church.¹¹ To consider the Augsburg Confession as the mission statement of a reforming movement within the Catholic Church has merely adopted the modern, idealistic notion of history that runs like a river inevitably to the sea according to strict laws of progress, and then applied it to the Church.

The Augsburg Confession knows neither the modern notion of confessiona-
lization¹² nor the fanatical notion of a developing history of dogma supervised

¹⁰ Recall Vinzenz Pfnür and responses in Joseph A. BURGESS, ed. *The Role of the Augsburg Confession* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 1–26.

¹¹ “The confessions are a *proposal of dogma*”, Robert W. JENSON and Eric W. GRITSCH, *Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and Its Confessional Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 3.

¹² As, for example, Heinz SCHILLING, “Confessionalization: Historical and Scholarly Perspectives of a Comparative and Interdisciplinary Paradigm,” in *Confessionalization in Europe, 1555–1700*,

by the Spirit according to a false use of John 14:26: “But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.” The church is not the spirit-led organ of unfolding revelation as divine mystery, a sacrament in itself. The CA is both pre- and post- confessionalization as that term has come to be based on Ernst Troeltsch’s 1912 *Protestantism and Progress*. Progress, with various Confessions and societies as their source, was measured by that argument entirely according to the distance they “progressed” from natural law. Of course this has no understanding whatsoever of the eschatological heart of the CA, which is to locate – finally! – where the law actually ends. The Augsburg Confession marks the end of church as it was known in the fanatical form of a teaching *tradition* that added to, or developed, the material of Scripture into new forms (as if the Spirit’s work were merely to add something not yet made clear in Scripture itself). *Sola Scriptura* was the result, and theology and the world has never remained the same. The break with the false notion of church marks the key distinction used throughout the Confession between *human traditions* and the *Word of God* announced first in CA VII: “And it is enough for the true unity of the church to agree concerning the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. It is not necessary that human traditions, rites, or ceremonies instituted by human beings be alike everywhere,” worked through to the concluding article on the limits to the power of bishops (CA XXVIII). It is true, CA VII is the most ecumenical statement ever made, and this is not because it fits the pattern of Roman ecumenism, or Troeltsch’s scheme for identifying progress, but because the CA has touched the cosmic matter of the eschaton, the final judgment of God that brings the law to an end.

Rejection of the Augsburg Confession is not a matter of plural doctrinal perspectives on grace, nor is it merely about “certain abuses” of church practice. Rejection of the Augsburg Confession is rejection of God’s own preacher and is the cause of all modern schism. The CA was not, and is not the problem of disunity, its rejection is. Modern discussion refuses what I am saying here because it has rejected God’s apocalypse and so the fulfillment of Scripture in history. Indeed, this led to the rejection of history itself as it unfolds accidentally (from the view of humans), with the preaching office, and substituted for it an idealistic theory with an imaginary, utopian goal. It then has the habit of reducing the CA to another expression of a group’s experience or worldview. As such, it learns to think of grace, confessions, and even God himself as the ongoing application and perfection of the law alone. Doctrine has become the Church’s

edited by Hans J. HILLERBRAND, Anthony J. PAPALAS and John M. HEADLEY (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), 21–35.

development of rules for new contexts not addressed in Scripture. It should not surprise anyone that the churches of various persuasions are where gospel is routinely lost in the name of some higher calling, like unity or mission. God acted in the Augsburg Confession, and a holy thing it was! In particular, God moved against progress as transcendence or transformation or the supernatural in the form of grace fulfilling the law in us. In a classic statement to Spalatin 30 June 1530, Luther identified the problem with turning the gospel into such deification when unity with Christ knows no end to law:

Be strong in the Lord and on my behalf continuously admonish Philip not to become like God, but to fight that innate ambition planted in us in paradise by the devil to divinization. This doesn't do us any good. It drove Adam from paradise, and also it alone drives us away, and drives peace away from us. We are to be men and not God. That is the *Summa*; it cannot be otherwise, or eternal anxiety and heartache will be our wages.¹³

The great *Summa* is not supernatural, it is precisely to become a creature of the Creator, a creature who lives by faith alone that depends upon getting a preached word from God to which God is unflinchingly faithful. History is truly God's intervening, but not through normal channels of power, but by means of the preaching office. That office is filled by the kinds of people who in 1530 stood before Kings and made their public confession in a specific time and place – at the end of the world.

VI CA is proclamation

I am aware of how little the CA means in the grand scheme of things, humanly speaking. It means almost nothing in public society – though perhaps there are some few shreds of influence in the great Nordic or German countries – but in America where “freedom reigns,” it means nothing. I also know it means virtually nothing in the great, growing churches of today – the Roman and the fanatical Pentecostal. Lutherans scrape for evidence of some meaning in history so that we can say it still has value – including seeking to dedicate anniversaries to reinvigorate interest in the document. Nevertheless, the Augsburg Con-

¹³ WA Br. 5 no. 1612 s. 415.41–47: *Tu esto fortis in Domino & Philippum meo nomine Exhortare semper, ne fiat Deus, Sed pugnet contra illam inhatam & a Diabolo in paradiso implantatam nobis ambitionem diuinitatis, Ea enim non expedit nobis. Eiecit Adam paradiso, Nos quoque ipsa sola exturbat & extra pacem trudit. Wir sollen menschen vnd nicht Gott sein. Das ist die summa; Es wird doch nicht anders, odder ist ewige vnrüge vnd Hertzeleid unser lohn. Vale in Christo.*

fession was the eschatological act of God whose work is in secret and which therefore creates one true thing – faith. That faith has been produced in my students over and over again by means of this document is evidence of the eschaton still at work, however dark is the cloud we find ourselves in.

As an eschatological document the proper genre of the CA is *proclamation*. Luther was ecstatic at the loud, long, public reading of the document by Christian Beyer – not its printing. He succinctly told Melanchthon; “Christ has been preached.” The emperor was trying to rid the territories of the evangelical preaching, and even forbade any preaching prior to and during the Diet. Luther himself was barred from appearing, but a sermon got preached despite the legal constraints! Christ broke through and appeared where he was not welcome – that is Christ’s *modus operandi*. The Augsburg Confession served as a public, historical sermon preached to the very people who were presumed to be God’s servants on earth but were suppressing the gospel for the sake of a unity based only on the law of love.

The Augsburg Confession should be heard as a sermon, not as a scholastic collection of dogma or the compilation of the various positions of the fathers (tradition). Certainly it is a legal document concerned with the matters of canon law and the law of the empire, but the heart of the matter goes missing if we do not hear what was preached there. Nor was this sermon preached “to the choir,” or in the worshipping community – as if that were the only proper subject of a confession. It is preached, like the prophets of old did, to those who have no ears to hear. The result was not only the sharp condemnation of Protestant fanaticism, “They condemn the Anabaptists *and others* who think that the Holy Spirit comes to human beings without the external Word through their own preparations and works” (CA V.4), but also those who reject the very word of forgiveness in order to keep the system of merit, “human beings cannot be justified before God by their own powers, merits, or works. But they are justified *gratis* on account of Christ through faith when they believe they are received into grace and that their sins are forgiven on account of Christ, who by his death made satisfaction for our sins. God reckons this faith as righteousness” (CA IV). Throughout the document the pattern is the preacher’s distinction of law and gospel, as Melanchthon would describe it belatedly, in the *Apology IV* – while the evangelicals know all of Scripture is composed of these two things, the commands and the promises, the opponents “single out the law.”

So the CA distinguishes first the two words of God in Scripture, *command* and *promise*, then it distinguishes secondarily between *God’s words* and human words or *traditions*. The latter is the distinction that Rome routinely confuses, since the Church holds that its words, including those in the creeds, are formations of or additions to Scripture made by the Spirit’s post-scriptural movement.

That is why the idea that the church is a sacrament has become such a large investment for the Roman Church. The Augsburg Confession brings this false theory of Spirit to an end.

Just as Luther's *Bondage of the Will* was not a debate with Erasmus, but was Luther preaching and consoling the poor Christian humanist, since Luther realized no one else could possibly get through to Erasmus, so the CA was God's instrument to get through to the very ones who had made grace into an extension of the law. It did not matter if one was more Nominalist or preferred the old school of Aquinas, or even if one knew nothing of these theologians but was simply trying to live out a life in accordance with the requirements of God's divine law, grace had become co-opted by the church so that it was some kind of a "gift" by which righteousness was given in order to fulfill the law. Christ was an external thing to this matter, and so, strangely enough, the sermon of the Augsburg Confession had to be preached *against grace itself*. Far from being an "ecumenical proposal of doctrine," regarding the teaching of grace, it was an eschatological attack on grace itself once grace had become legalized.

I myself think the sermon preached through the CA is not the most direct, effective sermon ever preached – Mildenerger once called it "neutral" sounding, because the document mostly speaks about preaching done elsewhere, not in the present (e.g., "our churches teach," and the like), but the historical situation would not allow much, I suppose. Christ is not nearly so clearly present in it as should be the case. But the document became apocalyptic not because it fell perfect to earth from heaven. Christ does appear where necessary, for example, in the infamous article that caused the rejection of the Augsburg Confession by the Confutators and befuddled subsequent attempts to amend the breach (including the modern American Lutheran/Roman Catholic dialogue), CA XXI "Concerning the cult of saints." "Saints," it says, may be "*remembered and imitated*, but not *called upon*" since Scripture does not teach us to call on saints, instead, "it sets before us Christ alone as mediator, atoning sacrifice, high priest, and intercessor. He is to be called upon, and he has *promised* that our prayers will be heard." Luther was no doubt thinking about this very thing in his letter to Cordatus when he reminded his friend that God is *listener to prayers*, as Psalm 62 assures us.

VII The public confession

Normally, a preacher would speak entirely on behalf of grace, and encourage others to accept it in faith, but preachers also have to know what their hearers

have made of the word. Thus, when grace has come to mean *gratia gratum faciens*, then one must actually condemn grace! This kind of preaching, however, is the very kind the Apostle Paul used at the crucial time when law had re-entered the preaching of Gospel in Galatia. Paul had to preach against the law, even while it is God's own holy will. It is not quite so apparent in the CA as it is in the *Apology IV*, but this sermon also preaches against love (eros, philia and agape!) when love is confused for legal purposes with faith alone. Imagine that, the heart of the Lutheran teaching is an eschatological proclamation *against grace and against love!* When this is necessary, the apocalypse has surely come.

What moment was this to which Luther and the CA had come? God's hidden work is "No longer just a word; it has arrived in work." Luther does not hesitate, he says the *Tribulation* had arrived at that place and time, 25 June 1530, Augsburg. Here is the Devil's last stand, "and we should act accordingly. Yet He is [here] who along with the tribulation brings about the escape for the faithful."

Luther then took a whole paragraph of his letter to quibble with Melancthon's wording to him when his friend had obediently expressed the desire that he should follow Luther's "authority" in writing and editing the Augsburg Confession. Luther recognized that if that kind of authority placed in him was needed previous to this Diet, it was no longer the case. The CA was able to remove a terrific load from Luther's own conscience. It was the time in which the shift of the cosmic battle was made from Luther's conscience to the historical, public event of the proclamation of the Augsburg Confession:

I don't like that you write in your letter that you have followed my authority in this cause. I don't wish to be, or be called, the originator [of] this cause for you people... If this is not simultaneously and in the same way your cause, then I don't want it to be called mine and imposed upon you. If it is my cause alone then I will handle it by myself.¹⁴

Luther knew by then how the specific attack of the Devil was to direct a sinner back to the law – the law of love, of unity, of church discipline, of grace in the form of participation in the divine or an uncreated grace – or whatever the legal scheme might be. But this was no longer simply an issue of his conscience, but had become a public, cosmic battle. This battle takes place in the form of a trial in which Satan seeks to prosecute a sinner by turning him into a defendant who must argue his cause on the basis of some inner righteousness that is set against the promise of Christ of forgiveness.

¹⁴ LW 49, WA Br. 5 no. 1609 s. 406.43–47: *In literis tuis displicuit, quod scribis vos in ista causa meam auctoritatem secutos. Nolo vobis autor esse aut dici in ista causa, etiamsi id commode possit interpretari, tamen vocabulum hoc nolo. Si non est simul et aequae vestra causa, nolo eam dici meam, et vobis impositam. Ipse agam, si solius mea est.*

It was the moment in which the eschatological struggle between the kingdom of the devil and that of God had ceased to do battle in the little, individual conscience of the lowly German monk, Luther, and emerged publicly in the voice of others who were now used as the instrument of the Holy Spirit to provide faith, “where and when it pleased Him” (CA V). The prompting for Luther’s June 29th letter to Melanchthon was a question (Luther called it Melanchthon’s *apologia*) about what could possibly be conceded to the papists. Luther observed that more than enough had been conceded already. Then he named the time:

Here I am sufficiently well off, for it seems that that demon, which till now has beaten me with fists, has given up ... And I hope that He who defeated in me the father of lies will also overcome [that] murderer. He has sworn to kill me, this I certainly know, and he will have no peace until he has devoured me.¹⁵

Luther referred to the cosmic battle between Satan and God, which for a time raged in his own conscience at least since the Diet of Worms, not as a psychological problem, but as an *eschatological* fact – an event that had happened and has God’s final judgment. The Evil One was defeated – not just in general – but *in me*, Luther states calmly and forthrightly: “All right, if he devours me, he shall devour a purgative (God willing) which will make his bowels and anus too tight for him.” There is Luther, boasting in Christ who has now not only defeated the Devil *in him* but has gone public with announcement of the cosmic, universal defeat of the devil once and for all. That is what is truly meant by eschatological. The devil became a past, historical event in the life of the dead Luther, and now this has happened publicly, communally, including in the conscience of Melanchthon. As we would expect with an apocalyptic sermon, the CA was now official a public, communal event in the cosmic battle of God and Satan.

VIII The Trial and the Locus of Faith

What kind of confession is the Augsburg Confession? What time had Luther and the Reformation come to? It is the time in which God’s hidden work is, “no

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, s. 406.29–34: *Ego hic satis commode valeo, videtur enim spiritus ille remittere (scilicet precibus fratrum et vestris fractus), qui me colaphisavit hactenus, quamquam suspicor loco eius successisse alium, qui corpus meum fatiget. Tamen malo ferre tortorem hunc carnis quam carnificem illum spiritus. Et spero, qui vicit in me patrem mendacii, vincet etiam homicidam. Er hat mir den Tod geschworn, das fühle ich wohl, hat auch kein Ruge, er habe mich denn gefressen. Wohlan, frißt er mich, so soll er (ob Gott will) ein Purgation¹⁵ fressen, die ihm Bauch und Ars zu enge machen soll. Was gilt's?*

longer just a word; it has arrived in work.” The word is doing what God’s word always does – making a new reality. The cosmic battle finally takes place in the form of a trial. Satan seeks to prosecute a sinner by turning him into a defendant who must argue his cause on the basis of the law – even the fulfilling of the law with the aid of grace. When Christ takes the place of the defendant, indeed takes on the death sentence of the defendant, this all unravels. Then something truly eschatological takes place. With the trial already underway, the charges are dramatically reversed; the prosecutor becomes the defendant charged with the crime of opposing Christ himself.

This is always the way it is in true confession. A confession comes at the point of death for the defendant. The law makes an airtight accusation – until Christ arrives and the law comes to an end. Then the trial suddenly shifts and the accuser becomes the accused. What was an earthly trial of lowly theologians from Wittenberg became God’s own courtroom in which the mighty (kings and popes) are brought down from their thrones. It is the great cosmic overthrow of the powers of this world, all on the basis of a little sermon that was preached. This is why Luther later declared in another public confession: “Christ’s merit is not acquired through our work or pennies, but through faith by grace, without any money and merit – not be the authority of the pope, but rather *by preaching a sermon*, that is, God’s Word.”¹⁶

It is possible, of course, that Luther was wrong about what sort of Confession the Augsburg Confession is. He may also have been wrong about the cause of the Evangelical preaching shifting from his own conscience to the public proclamation by a lay person in the Halls of Augsburg. But how do we make a proper judgment of such assertions without simply dismissing them as hubris or dementia? How do we gauge the impact of this document, the success or failure of the CA? How do we consider its use and purpose five hundred years later? Judgment of these matters is made in the only way eschatology can be judged – in the same way a preacher judges the success of a sermon. That is, in the new *locus* of faith – after the fact. From early on, Luther recognized that this *locus* was not grasped by any logic or system of philosophy or rhetoric that preceded it. Neither is it a simple matter of theology vs. philosophy. Faith is an entirely new, eschatological locus when it grasps Christ as the end of the law. God does not use the law to save.

God has placed this cause into a specific *locum communem* which Luther recognized that you don’t have in your rhetoric, or in your philosophy. It is

¹⁶ *Smalcald Articles* II.2.24, Robert KOLB, Timothy J. WENGERT, ed. *Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 305. BSLK, 424: “*sondern durch die Predigt oder Gottes Wort furgetragen.*“

called “Faith.” So Luther continued; “In this *locus* are posited all the things that cannot be seen and do not appear which, should someone attempt to make these things visible, touchable and comprehensible, as you do, as reward for his labors he will bring back worries and tears such as those you are bringing back to all of us who are vainly protesting.”¹⁷ God was not asking Melancthon to look for signs of approval – the man could not help but look at the astrological signs of God’s will in the stars as long as he lived – in fact God actively hides from those who would make his reign a reign of the law. Luther continued, “and he has made the darkness his hiding place. If someone wants to, let him try to change it. Had Moses attempted to comprehend the outcome by which he might escape the pharaoh’s army, then Israel would perhaps to this day be in Egypt.”¹⁸ Luther’s choice of Moses was precise. Prior to the law in the form of the Decalogue, Moses depended upon faith alone in the promise from God. Therefore, Luther concluded his letter to Melancthon with a prayer, since God is *listener to prayers* (Ps 62) that sums up what kind of confession the Augsburg Confession now was – and continues to be: “May the Lord increase faith for you and for all of us. If one has faith what may Satan and the whole world do?” The result of the confession at Augsburg was to identify the church truly:

But if we don’t have this faith, why don’t we then console ourselves at least with the faith of others? For by necessity there are others who believe in our stead, unless there is no more a church in the world, and Christ has ceased to be with us prior to the end of the world. For if Christ is not with us, where, I earnestly wish to know, is he then in the whole world? If we are not the church, or a part of the church, where is the church? Are the dukes of Bavaria, Ferdinand, the Pope, the Turk, and those like them, the church? If we don’t have God’s Word, who are the people who have it?¹⁹

17 WA Br 5, 406 LW 49, 331, translation altered, WA Br 5 s. 407.53–62: *Consolatus sum te proximis literis, utinam non occidentibus, sed vivificantibus. Quid possum aliud? Finis et eventus causae te discruciat, quia non potes eum comprehendere. At si eum comprehendere posses, nollem ego istius causae me esse participem, multo minus autorem. Deus posuit eam in locum quendam communem, quem in rhetorica tua non habes nec in philosophia tua: is vocatur fides, in quo loco omnia posita sunt ου) βλέπόμενα και_μή φαινόμενα, quae si quis conetur reddere visibilia apparentia et comprehensibilia, sicuti facis tu, is referat curas et lachrymas pro mercede laboris, quales tu refers, nobis omnibus frustra reclamantibus*

18 *Ibid.*, s. 406.62–67 *Dominus pollicitus est se habitare in nebula, te tenebras posuit latibulum suum. Wer da will, der mach’s anders. Si Moses comprehendere studuisset finem, quo evaderet exercitum Pharaonis, Israël adhuc hodie fortassis esset in Aegypto.*

19 *Ibid.*, s. 406–7.65–70. *Dominus adaugeat tibi et nobis omnibus fidem. Hac habita quid faciet Satan cum toto mundo? Quodsi nos non habemus fidem, cur non saltem aliena fide nos solamur? Sunt enim necessario alii, qui credant loco nostri, nisi nulla est amplius ecclesia in mundo, et Christus desiit esse nobiscum ante consummationem saeculi. Si enim nobiscum non est, obsecro, ubi est in toto mundo? Si nos ecclesia vel pars ecclesiae non sumus, ubi est ecclesia? An Duces*

IX The Logic of the Gospel

Therein lays the tale of the Augsburg Confession. It is either the Word of God when it says “God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness in his sight, as St. Paul says in Romans 3 and 4” (CA IV.3), or it is not. Luther is willing to recognize that both possibilities exist, humanly speaking. Time (that is God’s eschatological time, not the infinite passage of time according to the laws of nature) will tell. Sinners have no choice in the meantime, however. If the Confessors don’t have the Word of God, then the promise of God (which exists in the dark cloud on your side) is false. Then we have only destruction by the judgment of the law to await. Here is the inevitable logic of the Gospel. It may not be true, but then, the only thing that is true is the law, and the law does not free. Then you are still in your sins and Christ is a fake. Luther concluded, “If God is with us, who is against us? *We are sinners* and are ungrateful, but [God] will not therefore be a liar.”

This is the great theme of the Augsburg Confession – we are not faithful; God does not lie. A promise given by Christ does not depend upon my righteousness – in the beginning, middle or at the end. Spirit is not extension of law to eternity. So Luther stated the conclusion of justification by faith alone: “And yet in this sacred and divine cause,” (not mine, not Melanchthon’s, not the Reformers), “*we cannot be sinners*, even though in our ways we are evil.”²⁰ This is what upset the Roman Confutators about sin remaining after baptism from the time of the Augsburg Confession to the present. It is not even that Aquinas’ distinction between form and material is better than the Scotist, it means, «We are sinners...we cannot be sinners.” This is not a paradox; it is eschatological. The sinner is killed, and a new creature raised when a preacher arrives with the words of law and gospel. The eschatological *simul* is always the impasse in this old world – and was in the Augsburg Confession. Confessors are dead; they cannot hear. They have no spirit or possibility left. There is nothing of created or uncreated nature to be perfected or grace to protect and increase anything, nor is there a mystical participation in the triune being that keeps them from death by the wrath of God. Now here a preacher has reached the real nadir of the art of proclamation, and Luther was teaching something to Melanchthon

Bavariae, Ferdinandus, Papa, Turca et similes sunt ecclesia? Si nos non habemus verbum Dei, qui sunt qui habent?

²⁰ *Ibid.*, s. 407.73–78: *Si ergo Deus nobiscum, quis contra nos? Peccatores sumus et ingrati, sed non ideo ille mendax erit. Neque tamen possumus peccatores esse in ista causa sancta et divina, etiamsi in nostris viis mali sumus. Sed tu non audis ista, ita Satan te affligit et aegrotare facit. Medeat tibi Christus, quod valde et assidue oro, Amen.*

that must be gone through by trial, it cannot be learned by text. A preacher always preaches to bound wills, not free ones. They cannot hear. So the preacher sees and experiences nothing but the cloud – but clings to the promise in any case. So Luther concluded his letter to Melanchthon: «But you do not even hear [any of] this, so distressed and weak does Satan make you. May Christ heal you; for this I pray fervently, and without interruption. Amen.»

Of course, Luther wanted to say this to Melanchthon in person, that is why he breaks off in a prayer, but of course he has been preaching law and gospel to Melanchthon, “I wish an opportunity would present itself to me to come to you; I am eager to come even without having been asked or invited.” So, Luther ends now with the new prayer for grace, once Christ and not the law are the content of grace, *favor dei* as forgiveness of sin: “God’s grace be with you and with all of you. Amen.” And then Luther adds the *p.s.*: “I am ready to concede all things [to the opponents] if only the gospel alone is permitted to remain free with us. What fights against the gospel, however, I cannot concede.”

The Augsburg Confession is a certain type of Confession. It has all the worldly marks of any document that expresses a position: it is political, has a social milieu, and has precursors like the Torgau articles. But it is most importantly eschatological. It was used as an instrument of the Holy Spirit – in the form of a proclamation of God’s words, law and gospel to destroy old power like the canon law, the ecclesiastical power to make dogma, the Emperor’s responsibility to defeat the Turk, the demand for unity in the Empire – all of this kind of law came to an end when Christ was preached to sinners to make them righteous by the forgiveness of sin – merely by preaching a sermon. On 25 June, 1530 the Holy Spirit took the load from Luther, who up to that time had his conscience as the ground for the cosmic battle, and made it a public load and battle. The eschatological event came in the form of a trial, but a trial with a divine reversal as its conclusion. The powers which put the Confessors on trial were found in God’s own court, accused by the very law which they were trying to use to enforce unity and peace in the world. They were not bad folk; they just did not know the new *locus* of faith. They sought to *live* rather than *lose* their lives. What was the result of this public preaching brought in by the Spirit against all expectation? Well, the bound will does not hear. No minds appeared changed. Schism abounded. Nobody was convinced of the power of the words to free, since they did not hear these words as anything for themselves, but only as something that might create schism in church and empire, or might belong to others who are not so religious. They heard the sermon as something that broke the great catholic synthesis of law and grace. But God promised to live in the dark cloud. He did not promise that we should see results.

The Augsburg Confession could be an abomination, or perhaps some kind of neutral category of a proposal of dogma that has not quite made itself clear (and has only become more murky over the decades), or it just might in fact be an act of God in the cosmic battle that has not yet been revealed in its final effect. Pastors are used to this; they rarely ever know how successful their preaching is, and that is the way the Spirit wants it.



Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.