

Augsburg 1530/Seminex 1974

Today's the 468th anniversary of the presentation of the Augsburg Confession to the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. I thought you'd like to know. The year was 1530. Times were tough. Suleiman the Magnificent was outside the walls of Vienna with 600,000 Muslim troops, having just "scorch-earthed" his way through a big chunk of southeastern "Christian" Europe. That's why there are Muslims in the Balkans today. He seemed unstoppable. Yet he had to be stopped, and it was Charles V's job to do so. But his Holy Roman Empire of Germanic Nations was itself splitting in two as the Reformation movement grew.

So Charles called the conflicting sides to come to an Imperial Diet at Augsburg. His hope was for some sort of unity in the religious conflict—even if scissored and pasted—to get his Christian Empire unified so he could mobilize the troops to head for Vienna. Even under the best of efforts he'd have a hard time matching Suleiman's numbers. Well, the effort for religious unity at Augsburg failed. The Roman Catholic representatives never even got around to presenting their statement of faith. They were, after all, the establishment. "Everybody" knew what genuine catholicism was. So they saw their role at Augsburg to evaluate the confession of the other side and eventually compose a "confutation" to refute it. The emperor sided with the Roman critics. The reformers went home as losers. So what about Suleiman?

Just before the Diet Luther had proposed that there were two enemies outside the gates of Vienna: Suleiman and God. Luther divined that God was using Suleiman as the "rod of his anger" against Europe's hypocritical claim to be Christian. With such an ally Suleiman was invincible. Repentance, said Luther, is the only weapon that works to dissuade the enemy when that enemy is

God. So repentance is what he called for—hoping for at least a few to do so, who might thereby intercede vicariously for the multitudes who would not. For if God did relent as “maybe only ten!” did repent, Suleiman would lose his biggest ally—and his invincibility. Christian Europe might just survive.

The historical record shows that Suleiman halted his conquest (and Islamization) of Christian Europe there outside Vienna’s walls and went back home. Even without religious unity at Augsburg, and the military alliance that Charles V might have gained through it, Christian Europe was spared. Did vicarious repentance do it? Most historians, even Christian ones, cite other reasons.

Thus the main achievement of Augsburg 1530 is “only” the Augsburg Confession. That Confession has become the touchstone for what’s Lutheran, even though the word never appears in the text. The confessors were simply seeking to state what was Christian. Granted, Luther himself is not unimportant for what’s Lutheran, but Augsburg is the standard. So in the constitutions of the 100-plus Lutheran churches throughout the world today, it is the Augsburg Confession, not Luther and his teaching, that is named in the fundamental theological article.

Luther was not present at Augsburg. A prior diet had put a price on his head. Augsburg was not in his safety zone. Surprising for many is that the AC was written by someone not ordained, Philip Melanchthon. So too all its signatories were laity, princes and politicians who “‘fessed up” before the emperor at Augsburg with their own “Here I stand.”

The ethos of Semtex latched on to the Augsburg confessors—not only for theological substance, but also for understanding our own historical situation. We learned that we were living in a “time for confessing.” Umpteen times we were called to

articulate our faith and have it examined, finally at the Missouri Synod's New Orleans 1973 convention. As was true with the establishment party at Augsburg, we could never get our critics to "fess up" to their working theology—and let it be examined. Like the critics at Augsburg our critics claimed to be "the voice of old Missouri" by definition. Since our disagreement with them signalled that we were not, we "should seek our fellowship elsewhere."

The prospect for unity within Missouri was gone when we in the faculty majority were fired for refusing to acknowledge our most vocal accuser as our acting president. Even though the press, both secular and churchly, interpreted our conflict as a fight about the Bible, i.e., modern vs. conservative ways of interpreting it, within Seminex it became clearer that our conflict was like the one at Augsburg. The issue was the "one Gospel and sacraments," which Augsburg confessed as "enough" for the church's unity. In more ways than one the Augsburg Confession of 400-plus years ago became (again) the debate focus. It was not Biblical interpretation.

One signal of that fact is that of the five loyalist members of the "faculty minority," who then became the core of the new faculty at Concordia after the 45 of us went into Seminex, four were members of the department of systematic theology. That means they didn't teach Bible, but their teaching turf was doctrine, ethics and the Lutheran Confessions. Only one of the five was a Scripture professor. The Battle of Missouri that led to Seminex was about what it means to be Lutheran. It was a debate about the Augsburg Confession, and that document was confessing what it means to be Christian.

It will come as no surprise to hear that that debate continued within Seminex throughout the ten years of its existence. Pushed into an exile that no one had really planned for, we constantly

sought for clarity into what had happened to us, where we now were, and where we were called to be heading. None of that seeking was without vigorous debate and we did not always find consensus. More about that next time.

The word “walkout” (from the world of labor-management conflict) is often used—even by our supporters—in connection with Seminex, as though we went on strike against the administration of Concordia Seminary. Yet that is a misnomer. Admittedly this is one partisan’s perspective. It goes like this:

1. we were tried as a group for heresy at the New Orleans Convention,
2. found guilty by 60% and innocent by 40% of the delegates,
3. ordered to accept (and trust!) our major critic as our new seminary president,
4. fired for refusing to do so. Is that a walkout? In the rhetoric of the Lutheran confessions, we saw it as a time for confessing.

On the day after our dismissal we did indeed “walk” off campus with banners and hoopla in a grand procession to be welcomed by the theological deans of St. Louis University and Eden Seminary. The next day Seminex classes began on those two campuses. Sure there were other options, but none of them seemed sufficiently “faithful to our calling, faithful to our Lord.” We had put the word “exile” into our name, Concordia Seminary in Exile, but only later did we learn what it really meant.

D.v., more next time.

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