

# Augsburg Confession & Luther's Catechisms

Colleagues,

I'm coming to the end of the Winter Quarter in teaching 15 students about the Lutheran Confessions here in St. Louis. The course is an offering of the Lutheran School of Theology here in town, a ministry of the Metro St. Louis Coalition of ELCA congregations. For the upcoming Easter term the coalition asks for one on "Heresies Revisited." So if you've got any heresies lying around—warmed over old ones or brand new ones—tell me about them.

We've spend most of our time this quarter on three Reformation era documents of 1530-31, namely, the Augsburg Confession, the Pontifical "Confutation" [= Rebuttal] of the AC, and then Melanchthon's response to that Confutation in his "Apology" [=Defense] of the AC. We read these three side-by-side: point, counterpoint, and counter-counterpoint. We'll conclude the course with Luther's 2 catechisms.

Although there are 28 articles to the AC, they are not presented as a clothesline with 28 items of theological laundry hanging there—all of which are to be believed. Early on Melanchthon says that the Augsburg confessors are talking about only one doctrine. His Latin designation is "doctrina evangelii," the doctrine [singular] that is the Gospel. All the remaining articles are nothing more than "articula"-tions of that one Good News. Thus even the ancient doctrine of the Trinity comes out, not as the "truth you should believe" about God, but a proposal for talking about God so that it comes out to be Good News.

Farmboy that I am I've taken an old-fashioned wagon wheel as our classroom image for the structure of the AC. The HUB of the wheel is that "one doctrine." The many articles of the AC are SPOKES coming from the wheel . Even the doctrine of original sin in the AC is "Gospel-anchored." In negative

diagnostic format it articulates the Good News too. And, you guessed it, the hermeneutics of law-and-gospel is the RIM around the spokes holding them anchored in the hub. So we've rolled through the term on the hub, spokes, rim of this wheel.

But now we're coming down the home stretch. For our last session we're going to "do" Luther's catechisms. Appended below a handout that I've put together for students as study helps.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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## **Martin Luther's Reform of the Catechism.**

1. In the year 1529 Martin Luther wrote two catechisms (German titles: Kleiner Katechismus, Grosser Katechismus). He did so after a survey was made in congregations in Saxony (1528). In this "Saxon Visitation" seminary professors from Wittenberg went out into the towns and villages to listen & learn what was actually happening in the preaching and teaching in the congregations. What they discovered was horrendous. Many people in the congregations, & many pastors too, did not know basic Christianity. With his 2 catechisms—one for laity, one for clergy—ML offers help to improve the sad situation.
2. There was a long tradition of catechisms in the Western Latin church. They usually had three parts: Apostles Creed, Lord's Prayer, 10 Commandments, and usually the parts came in this order: Creed first, LP second, Commandments last. Luther changed the order in his catechisms, but—more important—he changed the theology underlying all parts of the catechism. He also added 3 more parts—Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and Private Confession & Absolution. Six Chief Parts.

3. You recall from our first class session that Luther's original discovery, "breakthrough," as he called it, was that God speaks two different "words" in the Bible: God's law and God's gospel. Two words from the same God to the same human beings, but as different as death and life, night and day. Law is God's requirement. Its primary verb: require. Gospel is God's gift. Its primary verb: offer. Luther's catechisms apply this distinction between law and gospel in all 6 parts.
4. Earlier catechisms used in the church did not know that distinction. They taught the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, & the Commandments as revelations of God's will for Christians: what people OUGHT to believe, how they OUGHT to pray, & how they SHOULD behave. Those three Words of God, it seemed, touched the basic areas of a Christian's life—faith, worship, ethics; (or) the mind, the heart, the hand; (or) thinking, feeling, acting.
5. But the language of "should" and of "ought" made the entire catechism to be God's law—things which God required people to do. That is not Good News for sinners, not Gospel.
6. Luther begins both catechisms with the Commandments, not the Creed. But he does not present the decalogue as ethics. Instead the 10 commandments are God's word for diagnosis, God's X-ray, to show us our sin, our sickness. They do tell us what we should do, but they show us that we are NOT doing what we should be doing. They show us that our person (inside), not just our action (outside), needs to be changed.
7. The first commandment, said ML, is really the only commandment there is. The other 9 commandments actually "articulate" this first one—we should fear, love and trust in God—in these other areas of our life. But even for all their godliness, for people who are sinners, the 10

commandments are not good news. None of us (inside) is fearing, loving & trusting God in all areas of our life. We're all first commandment-breakers.

8. In Luther's catechisms Good News does not come until we get to the Apostles Creed. And even there the Gospel's sort of Good News is not present in the Creed's first article. The first article says that God is our creator and that everything we have is a gift from God. That sure sounds good. But these gifts put us under obligations ("oughts") that we can never fulfill. The punch to the solar plexus in Luther's explanation of that first article is flattened in the English translations we memorized: "For all of this [multi-gifted existence] it is my duty to thank and to praise, to serve and obey God. This is most certainly true." What his German says is: For all this I am already in arrears, way behind in my payments, to thank and to praise.... This is most certainly true!" The decalogue leaves us guilty before God.
9. Only when we come to the 2nd article of the creed ["I believe in Jesus Christ"] does the Good News begin. In this article the confession is simple: Jesus Christ is my Lord. The biographical predicates to him in the text of the article are the means by which he became that Lord.
10. After the 2nd article of the creed all the remaining parts of the catechism are Good News, including Lutehr's 3 addenda: Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and Confession and Absolution.
11. The Creed's third article is the "good news" about God's work (through Holy Spirit and the church) to connect people today to Jesus Christ as Lord. It tells how sinners today receive the Good News that they too need in order to survive in the face of the X-ray report about them. Not only the decalogue, but the first article of the creed as well pinpoints our pathology.

12. The Lord's Prayer is Good News for practicing our trust in God & for receiving God's continual care and blessings in the struggle of daily life, a struggle articulated on 7 turfs.
13. Baptism, Lord's Supper and Confession & Absolution are three resources (means of grace) that God supplies for staying connected to Christ in our struggle to live by faith in daily life. In these add-on parts to his catechisms Luther's emphasis is not CORRECT TEACHING about these 3 sacraments, but the best way to USE all 3 for daily life.
14. "Using" baptism means dying and rising with Christ every day that we live, facing temptation & tough situations with the words: "I am baptized!"
15. "Using" the Lord's Supper means receiving it often (not just 4 times a year!) & hearing the words "given and shed for you." You are "worthy" (prepared) for it simply by admitting that you need Christ, & trusting that he comes to you in the LS.
16. "Using" Confession & Absolution means actually doing it, so that the burden of our daily sinning is taken away and we hear Christ's word of forgiveness with our own name included: "Ed, by Christ's command I announce to you the forgiveness of the sin(s) you have just confessed." It's like dying and rising again, like baptism. A penitential funeral followed by an Eastering word of forgiveness.

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**P.S.** For the curious. Here's the take-home exam that "for credit" students will get this evening.

**Final examination:**

## **Lutheran Confessions.**

**Due Date: May 18, 1999**

**This Examination asks you to write 4 essays.**

**SECTION A.** Select TWO spokes from the Wheel of the Augsburg Confession (our diagram of wheel and spokes and rim from our first class session) and write one essay on each of the two topics that you chose. In each essay answer the following:

- A. What is the teaching of the Augsburg Confession and the Apology on this doctrine?
- B. What is the connection between this doctrine and the Hub of the Wheel, the Gospel center of the diagram? How does the Rim affect this doctrine?
- C. Give an example of a false teaching on this doctrine, and then show how you would respond to that false teaching.

**SECTION B** Select TWO of the following and write an essay to answer each of them:

- A. What is the basic meaning of the word “confession?” Show how that meaning is present in these three places: “confession of faith,” “confession of sins,” and “Augsburg Confession.”
- B. In the Apology Melanchthon says that the Confutators were reading the Bible in the wrong way—even though they use many Bible passages as they critique the AC. What was their “wrong way?” What does he say is the “right way?” Why does he think that his way to read the Bible is better?
- C. In our discussion of AC 5 I said: “This article understands the term MINISTRY to be like a pipeline.” Use the “pipeline” picture to describe what all is happening when “ministry” takes place.
- D. Answer this question: Has my own “working theology”

changed during this course in the Luth. Confessions? If yes, describe the How? and Why? If no, describe Why not.