

Some Thoughts on the Augsburg Aha! – The Augsburg Confession Itself

Colleagues:

A funny thing happened on the way to ThTh 500. While I was not confecting anything for that half-thousandth posting because 16 of you were sending in the puzzle pieces for number 500, I got a phone call. “Can you—at this eleventh hour—teach a course on Lutheran Confessions at Springfield, Illinois (100 miles up north from St. Louis on the Interstate) starting already Saturday January 12? It’s an every-other-Saturday all-day-long seminar for ELCA folks from Illinois enrolled in an alternate-track for pastoral credentials.” At the other end of the phone was Ron Neustadt (Seminex 1974), himself pastor at St. Mark Lutheran Church (ELCA) across the Mississippi in Belleville, Illinois and authorized agent of the outfit offering the course. That “outfit” is LST-STL, the “Lutheran School of Theology – St. Louis,” a grass-roots boot-straps seminary-for-everybody, an agency of the Metro St. Louis Coalition of ELCA congregations on both sides of the river. “Only under one condition will I say yes,” I told Ron, “and that is if you and I do it together.” He said OK, and we’re in business.

I’m the goldie-oldie who’s done it umpteen times before, Ron (enrolled in one of those done-it-before confessions classes at Seminex three decades ago) has that many years of experience as a pastoral theologian. During those years he’s been consciously and creatively doing his pastoral praxis in the Augsburg tradition. So teaming up with Ron for my “old job” is a new thing—and after our first venture a fortnight ago—also great

fun. He's got pastoral stories for nigh onto every Augsburg item.

Ron also has more energy than I, so he put together the syllabus and assignments.

One textbook resource we have is itself a product of LST-STL, from the time when Michael Hoy was dean of the school. To teach the "Augsburg" part of the Lutheran Confessions (aka Book of Concord) Mike created a synopsis-parallel texts-of the three major documents from the "battle" that went on at Augsburg in 1530.

First column on the left side of the page is the text of the Augsburg Confession itself-article by article, all 28 of them. Alongside that (second column) is the Roman Catholic official response ("Confutation") to each AC article all the way through. Third column is the Confessors' response to the Confutation, Philip Melanchthon's "Apology (=Latin word for defense) of the AC." This too article by article 1 to 28.

So students read texts left-to-right across the page.

Column 1: Here's what the AC says: Art. 1 about God, Art 2 about original sin, etc.

Column 2: Here's what the Confutators said about that article.

Column 3: Here's what Melanchthon says about what "they" said about that article.

It's Mike's brilliant teaching device for getting to the nitty-gritty in a hurry. And we have "only" five Saturdays to walk/talk students through those 28 articles.

For our first Saturday Ron and I met at an Interstate intersection in Illinois (before sunrise!) for the two-hour drive to Springfield.

We met the twelve students at an ELCA church there. After getting acquainted we attempted this:

First off some historical stuff—what is a confession? What does that term (homologia) mean in the New Testament? Then in subsequent church history? What had happened in “Reformation” history leading up to Augsburg? What was at stake for the Aug. Confessors? All of the AC signers were laity. Also Philip Melanchthon, the theologian-author of the text! Luther, under the imperial ban, not present.

How is the AC put together? Its flow-chart. Twenty-one articles of doctrine where we “surely” are “orthodox” as any Catholic can see. Articles 22-28 are about church-life changes we’ve made BECAUSE of our Catholic faith. Note the Gospel-centered “system” for uniting the 28 articles. Passed on Bob Bertram’s bon mot that the 28 “articles” of the AC are intentionally(?) 28 varieties for “articulating” the one and only “doctrine” in the AC, namely, THE “doctrine of the Gospel” – “doctrina evangelii” in the Latin text of AC 5.

That took up the three hours in the morning. Ron and I had agreed on a ping-pong pattern for who’s at the podium moving through these topics—with comments welcome from the silent partner on the sidelines at any time. It went well.

Half hour lunch and back to work. Three more hours.

AC article 1: God.

“Our churches teach with great unanimity that the decree of the Council of Nicaea concerning the unity of the divine essence and concerning the three persons is true and should be believed without any doubting.” Then follows the language of Nicaea to define “essence” and “person.” AC 1 concludes with a condemnation of the heresies “contrary to this article” that

were rejected at Nicaea (325 A.D.). We noted that the “heresy of the Manichaeans, who assert that there are two supernatural powers, one good and one evil” in unending conflict in world history, is often proclaimed these days from the “bully pulpit” of the US White House.

Important to know is that in the Holy Roman Empire at this time, if you were not “orthodox” according to the Nicene Creed, you were also a political enemy of the Empire, a traitor. Therefore demonstrating that you were Nicene-orthodox also demonstrated that you were no traitor. Another notable item is the notion of “believe” in AC 1. There is not (yet) any hint here that the Confessors’ “new look” about faith/believing is “trusting Christ’s promise.” Here the object of “believing” is the text of the Nicene creed. The claim is it “should be believed.” The Augsburg Aha! about faith as promise-trusting doesn’t surface until later in the AC.

Confutation says AC 1 is OK.

Apology 1 acknowledges this approval and then just to make it “perfectly clear” Melanchthon says “We have ALWAYS taught and defended this [Trinitarian] doctrine. . . We STEADFASTLY maintain [it].” We are indeed Nicene-orthodox, neither heretics nor traitors.

AC 2 “Original Sin.”

Here is the full text: “Likewise, they [=the undersigned] teach that since the fall of Adam all human beings who are propagated according to nature are born in sin, that is, without fear of God, without trust in God, and with concupiscence. And they teach that this disease or original fault is truly sin, which even now damns and brings eternal death to those who are not born again through baptism and the Holy Spirit. They condemn the Pelagians and others who deny that the original fault is sin and

who, in order to diminish the glory of Christ's merits and benefits, argue that human beings can be justified before God by their own powers of reason."

Some things to note:

1. The text says: "SINCE the fall of Adam," not "because" of the fall of Adam. The Reformers do not "blame" Adam for sin coming into the world. God holds each sinner accountable for his/her own sinfulness in the Bible. Never does a sinner in the Bible get away with saying: "Adam and Eve are the ones who are at fault for me being a sinner. Not me." Instead the Confessors say: Ever since Adam (and Eve too) stopped trusting God's word spoken to them, people have been doing the same throughout human history. Adam/Eve were the first ones recorded in the Bible to do this. But since their time, all people have been doing the same thing.
2. "Born IN sin" is what the text says. Sin is like "soup." We are IN it.
3. TWO ITEMS are NOT present in a sinner: NO fear of God (=not saying Yes when God's law passes his verdict on us) and NO trust in God (not saying Yes to God's gospel) – and ONE ITEM has replaced the two missing items: concupiscence (the YEN, the URGE, the DESIRE to do things MY WAY, so that the arrow of my life always curves back into myself).
4. Note: "Original" sin–primal sin, sin-at-the-root–is not sin that I DO, but sin that I am "in." "Sinner" is a person curved away from God and curved into self. That is the "soup" that sinners are IN. That curvature already marks my PERSON even before I do any act at all–any thought, word, or deed. It is my sinner-person (me curved-back-into-myself) that then does start doing things that can be called sinS (plural). But sinS (plural) are always the deeds of a person carrying this "curved-back

trademark.”

5. This “shape of my person” is what sin really is, and it “even now damns and brings eternal death” (since it is a turn-way from God, the source of Eternal Life) to those who are not “born again through Baptism and the Holy Spirit.”
6. Pelagius, fifth century opponent of Augustine, denied this teaching about original sin. His teaching was not only false doctrine about human sinfulness, but also a Christological heresy since it “diminish[es] the glory of Christ’s merits and benefits.”

Note here how even the doctrine of original sin [o.s.] is connected to Christ, the Gospel-hub of the wagon wheel.

Roman Confutation on Art. II

Four statements:

1. On one point AC II is OK: Original sin really is sin. It carries deadly consequences. Pelagians who deny this really are to be condemned.
2. However, Confutators reject the statement “not fearing God and not trusting God is o.s.” It’s not ORIGINAL sin, it’s ACTUAL sin. It’s an action. Adults do that, but not infants. You have to have the “use of reason” in order to “not fear God and not trust God.”
3. Confutators reject “calling o.s. concupiscence,” if that means that concup. remains in a person after baptism.
4. If the Confessors mean to say that o.s. is concupiscence, but baptism does indeed take concup. away –as Augustine said–then their statement is OK.

Apology Article II

Melanchthon is angry at the response given to AC II by the RC

theologians (“lacking in honesty, quibbles, sophistry,” he says). Yet from these quibbles by the Confutators we see their completely different picture of o.s.

The “fight” centers around the technical term “concupiscence.” For the RCs concupiscence is “the inclination to evil” arising from human bodily existence. This is the psycho-somatic stuff—the drives, appetites, the bio-chemical urges—that humans have just like other mammals. In the Confutators’ perspective, these psycho-biological drives are “normal” and therefore they are OK, so long as they are kept under control and channelled into rightful expression. [E.g., Sex drive rightfully channelled into marriage.]

In class we distributed a New Yorker cartoon handout about “7 deadly sins.” It shows the classic seven—greed, lust, pride, gluttony, sloth, wrath, envy—as exaggerations, unrestrained exaggerations, of these 7 normal human “needs.” For the Confutators the term “concupiscence” designates these “drives” in every human being. They are OK unless they get out of control. When they get out of control, they become sin. Sin is fundamentally “misbehaving.”

For the Reformers the word concup. has nothing to do with biology. It is the label for the “normal” lifestyle of an incurved sinner, where my energy is used to live to the fullest the “incurved life.” It can be done with a very moral life (e.g., Pharisees in NT times) without any misbehaving at all. Concupiscence is a Latin term [cupere = Latin for “to desire.” The “con” prefix intensifies the meaning of the verb – “really” desire]. The Greek term shows up often in two terms in the NT. Example: In Romans 7:5 where Paul talks of “patheemata,” – usually translated “sinful passions” and in 7:7 “epithymia” – a yen, desire, longing, craving, an “I want,” – often translated “coveting.” [In class on Jan. 26 I hope to take a look at

Galatians 5:24 which contains both of these Greek words .]

Melanchthon labels original sin an “inclination,” but does not confine it to our biological urges. Sin, he claims, is the inclination of our entire person—all 100% of me has the inclination, the slant, the tilt, not to fear nor to trust in God, but to curve everything back into myself.

The Confutators’ notion was that sin is a defect, some damage done to human beings, with Adam and Eve as the ones who did it. The damage is focused on the “control mechanisms” designed to manage those biological urges. Adam and Eve’s original “undamaged” humanity was their “original righteousness,” – no misbehaving, everything managed according to God’s specs. But in the fall into sin they lost that “upper-level management.” Now all human beings enter the world with a “defect,” as damaged goods. However, this “damage,” though serious, is not so lethal that it cannot be fixed. Damaged goods can be repaired. It is like a car that has been banged up in a traffic accident. An automobile shop can fix it so that it runs like new again.

Apology 2 says: No, sin is like a car that has been “totalled.” No repair will fix it. The whole thing is smashed up. Apology 2 operates with Biblical images: “dead” in trespasses and sins, “enemies” of God, in “bondage, slavery, imprisoned” to sin. All those are total terms. They cover 100% of the human person. Needed here is not “repairs” of some damaged part, but something completely new and different, totally opposite, from being dead, enemy, enslaved. A 100% re-creation. You don’t “repair” a dead body, an enemy, a slave. Each needs a 100% total change: from dead to alive, from enemy to ally, from slavery to freedom.

Apology 2 claims that the Confutation “minimizes” o.s. (makes it small). And when o.s. is made small, much smaller than it really is, what else gets “minimized?” Right! Christ is made small too.

Note how often Melanchthon connects these two items, a “small” doctrine of sin and “small” need for Christ. See these numbered marginal paragraphs in the text of Apol 2: paragraphs 10, 33, 44, 48, 50. Here we see the full Gospel-grounding even of the doctrine of o.s. in Lutheran Reformation theology.

Sometimes Apology 2 refers to “higher powers” and “lower” ones in humankind. That distinction refers to the two-story notion of humans—going all the way back to Aristotle. The “lower” stuff is the biological drives, the bottom floor, the stuff shown in that 7-deadly sins cartoon where these drives have gone berserk, out of control. The “higher” stuff refers to the next story above that bottom floor: human reason, spirit, creativity, human will, etc., the “stuff” that makes humans more than just animals, the stuff that keeps the lower stuff in bounds. The Apology says sin shows up in both parts of the human self—higher and lower— not just the lower part as the Confutators claimed. ‘Fact is, it’s in these “higher” realms that original sin is most manifest. It is in the human head and human heart that we practice our “not fearing God, not trusting God, and curving into ourselves.”

Fruitful here was to ask: What is the understanding of sin in current American culture? Both American secular culture and American church culture? On this issue, which of the two views on sin debated at Augsburg has won the day?

Apology 2 is asking: “If it took a crucified and risen Messiah to get sinners un-sinned, then how bad must the sin problem really be?” The Augsburg Confessors hear the Confutation saying: “It is bad, but it can’t be THAT bad.”

The next two AC articles—3 and 4 on Christ and Justification—bring us to the “Augsburg Aha!” on how sinners get un-sinned. AC 3 says: Christ alone does it. AC 4 says sinners receive it by faith alone. On both counts the Confutators say:

No way! Stay tuned.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder