

Presentation of the Augsburg Confession
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✧ Jesu juva ✧

WHY BOTHER?

Nehemiah 8:1-12; I Timothy 6:11-16; Matthew 10:26-33

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

Today we commemorate the day when the Lutheran princes presented their confession of faith to the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Augsburg in Germany. By 1530 what had begun in a monastic cell with one man, Martin Luther, struggling to understand God's righteousness and grace had become a movement for reform that was now threatening to split the Western Church asunder. This meeting at Augsburg was called by the Emperor to bring the reform minded princes back to their senses and back to Rome. In January the Emperor, who was most concerned with the fact that the Turks had invaded Hungary and Austria, and posed a very real threat to all of Europe, summoned the German princes to Augsburg to: "take up the matter of deliverance from the Turk; [and] how, because of error and division, it may be possible to deal and determine in respect to the Holy Faith and Christian Religion... that we all may hold one single and true Religion, and, as we all are and do battle under one Christ, we may thus all live in one Commonwealth, one Church and one Unity..." (as translated in *The Confessional Principal and the Confessions of the Lutheran Church*, 286).

Despite his kind tone, however, Charles was in no mood to compromise with the Lutherans. A decade earlier at the Diet of Worms, he had said: "A single monk [Luther], led astray by private judgment has set himself against the faith held by all Christians for a thousand years and more, and impudently concludes that all Christians up this time had erred. I have therefore resolved to stake upon this cause all my dominions, my friends, my body and my blood, my life and soul" (*The Confessional Principal*, 288-289). There is nothing to suggest that Charles' commitment in putting down Luther and his followers had diminished.

And so the Lutheran princes at Augsburg faced a very difficult situation. There was much at stake. The Turks, who would destroy Christendom if they were not stopped, were on the doorstep. The Emperor, who had been at war with the Pope, had at last made a peace treaty with him and had promised to the Pope that he would root out Lutheranism. He had also threatened the German princes that if they continued to hold to Luther's teachings he would be obliged to punish them. And Charles appeared to have the power to do it. He had proven himself to be a military power, having put down revolts in Spain, having defeated the King of France, his main rival, in battle, and having brought even the Pope to his knees by sacking Rome. And now his attention was on them. Each of them had much to lose and very little to gain in opposing him.

But that is just what they did. They presented him their confession of faith, signed their names to it, and refused to give it up. Why did they do it? It would have been so much easier to simply keep their beliefs private, to be outwardly reconciled to Rome and to the Emperor even if they believed a little differently about the Gospel. And it would have been expedient too. They could

have presented a united front against the Turks. They could have protected their own interests too, their lands and positions which were being threatened by both Turk and Emperor. And they could have preserved a sense of unity in the Christian Church. So why did they insist on making their confession? They did so because they were faithful. They feared God more than Pope or Turk or Emperor. And Christ was of more value to them than position or land or even life itself.

What the Lutherans did at Augsburg is very much out of vogue today. Oh, many Christians will say that they believe something about Jesus or about the truth of the Bible; but they will not confess in a way that is precise or binding. They do not like creeds or confessions that claim to be authoritative. They prefer the minimalistic, compromising approach to the Faith. As long as you believe in Jesus, or in God's love, or in the Bible, or in fighting injustice, or some such, that's enough. For the last two weeks our deaconess and I have been manning an outreach table at the University's orientation fair. And every day I have listened to campus Christian groups claiming to be faithful to the Bible, but at the same time claiming that if you join their group you can continue to believe whatever your particular denomination teaches. Those doctrines, they say, don't really matter as long as you believe in Jesus. Each person, it seems, can have their own private beliefs and those private beliefs do not have to match their public confession, if there even is a public confession of the Faith.

And there are many Lutherans who now say, why should we bother any more with the Augsburg Confessions and with making precise confessions at all? Wouldn't we attract more people if we were a little less strident in our confession? Wouldn't it be easier to work with other Christians and have fellowship with them? Wouldn't it be more loving to others to allow for a diversity of opinions about doctrines like those concerning baptism, or the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper? And it should not surprise us that so-called Lutherans are calling out to us to leave the path of faithfulness, to abandon the confessions at Augsburg and join with the rest of Christendom in a Christian minimalism.

It will always, no doubt, be unpopular to make a bold and firm confession. And it will always be dangerous to do so. It might not be emperors and Turks that you face, but perhaps family members or friends or colleagues. You may miss out on things you want and lose some things you have if you are faithful. In some places in this world it may still cost you your life. But if you truly believe Christ and His Word, you will see that it is important enough to take the risk.

Our Lord says today: "Whatever I tell you in the dark, speak in the light; and what you hear in the ear, preach on the housetops. And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." In other words, Christ commands us to confess the Faith we have received regardless of the cost. And He recognizes that doing so is dangerous. He knows that there are many who will "kill the bodies" of those who confess Him faithfully. But then He says that we should not be afraid of them, but rather should respect God's power to kill body and soul. He's saying, be logical here. Who should you be more worried about, a danger whose threat is only temporary and uncertain, or a danger whose threat is eternal and cannot be escaped?

At the same time, He holds out not only fear of God, but the love of God as the motivation to confession. "Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will. But the very hairs of your head are numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows." God will uphold us in our confession. Even

if you lose everything because you have confessed, you have lost nothing in the end, for you will still have God's grace and blessings and the gift of eternal life. God believes we are of such great value, that He will not let us come to eternal harm if we are faithful. Do we believe God to be of such great value that we will risk confessing Him without compromise? Do we think Christ and His Gospel are worth the risk?

It is not only fear, however, that stops people from making a firm confession of faith, it is also that they do not wish to be bound themselves to a particular confession. It is the old desire to stand in the place of God and decide for yourself what is true and what is right. But a public, corporate confession doesn't allow for that. It says "this is the Truth" and we will make our stand on it.

The people of Ezra's day wept when they heard the Law read for the first time. Why did this sadden them so? Perhaps it was because they were convicted by what they heard. The Scriptures certainly support this, for over the several days that the Law was read, they spent hours in confession. But perhaps it was also the fact that the Word of the Lord bound them and separated them from others. Now, if they were going to be faithful Hebrews, they would have to confess the truth in word and in actions. Now they would have to separate themselves from the people around them who were not Jews. And it was a very hard thing to do.

And yet Ezra says to them: "This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn nor weep." And then he instructs them to enjoy a little feast, to have some sweet wine to drink and to eat some nice, juicy, fat meats, saying: "Do not sorrow, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." And the people stopped weeping and went out and feasted and according to Ezra "rejoiced greatly". Why did they rejoice? "because they understood the words that were declared to them." They understood the Word of the Lord and believed it, and knew the love of God and His grace toward them, and the promise of salvation in the Christ who was to come.

The Word of the Lord binds and yet frees. It calls for a difficult and uncompromising confession of Faith, and yet bestows all the blessings of God upon the faithful. Jesus sums it up by saying: "Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven." That's salvation and eternal life, to have Christ confess you to His Father.

And we too are called to confess Christ and to rejoice in doing so. You will face some danger in doing so. You will be less popular for being an uncompromising Christian. You may lose friends or position over it. But what you have been given is far more than these. Thus Luther could say in His great hymn written just a year before the Diet at Augsburg "And take they our life, goods, fame, child and wife; let these all be gone, they yet have nothing won. The kingdom ours remaineth." Christ and His kingdom are worth the risk.

For that is what is at stake. Every doctrine the Scriptures teaches matters. And every doctrine is connected in some way to the Gospel. Weaken doctrine and you begin to lose the Gospel itself. You lose Christianity. This is why it is so vital that one believe and confess what Christ says in His Word faithfully.

And the Word which binds us is also the Word that frees us, bringing us even now the Kingdom and its blessings. For Christ has called you His own through His Word at Baptism and made you a child of His kingdom. He calls out to you in His Gospel and forgives you your sins and strengthens you in your faith, and instructs you in it. And He gives you to dine on the food of heaven in Holy Communion, on Himself, His body and blood. And with these He gives you His Holy Spirit

that you may indeed be able to begin to confess Him faithfully, just as those princes did so long ago at Augsburg. May Christ our Lord strengthen and keep us, as He did them, that we may be uncompromising in our faithfulness and may always dwell in His blessings and kingdom. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, to life everlasting.

* Soli Deo gloria *