

# **The Continuing Relevance Of The Formula Of Concord**

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*By Richard D. Balge*

The doctrinal developments and deterioration and disunity which seemed to ensure the demise and disappearance of the Lutheran Confession within one generation after Martin Luther's death can hardly be understood without some understanding of the imperial and papal politics that provided the background of that period in the history of the true confession. Since nearly all present have taken courses in the history of the period, and since our time is not unlimited, we will only briefly review the chronology of the events leading up to the composition of and the subscription to the Formula of Concord of 1577.

## **THE AUGSBURG CONFESSION - 1530**

Summoned to an Imperial Diet to give an account of their faith and teaching, five "Protestant" princes presented twenty-one doctrinal articles and seven articles on abuses. These were read aloud before the assembled dignitaries of church and state, in German, on June 25, 1530. They were subscribed by Elector John of Saxony, Philip of Hesse, George of Brandenburg-Ansbach, Wolfgang of Anhalt and Ernst of Lueneburg, as well as the cities of Reutlingen and Nurnberg. Emperor Charles V responded to this *Augsburg Confession* with a *Confutation* which had been prepared by his papistic advisers. He decreed that the "Protestants" must repudiate the Confession and make the *Confutation* their own by April 15 of the following year.

## **THE SMALCALD LEAGUE - 1531**

Charles was really in no position to enforce this demand, especially if the Protestant princes confronted him with a united resistance. This they did by organizing the Smalcald League. This alliance was formed, not only in the interest of the evangelical confession, but also in the interest of asserting territorial rights in opposition to imperial demands.

This resistance constituted just one more threat to an emperor who was already under considerable pressure. Within the Empire, there were demands for religious reform. At the same time the pope was suspicious of Charles because the latter was not acting swiftly and decisively to crush the Protestant movement. The Hapsburg Empire was threatened from the East by the Turks, from the West by France, and from within by princes and electors who were jealous of Charles' power. He knew that he must compromise and temporize; and he did. His demands for the withdrawal of the *Augsburg Confession* were not insisted upon at Regensburg in 1531.

## **TRUCE OF NURNBERG 1532**

The following year's Diet conceded that the evangelical movement should be tolerated where it already existed. The matter was deferred until the following year. In fact, the Empire at this point was being politically fragmented along religious lines. It would be impossible thereafter, and until 1870, to deal with Germany as one political entity. Charles V hoped, of course, that the pope would call a general council for reform. If some of the abuses of the papacy could be ameliorated and if the military power of the Smalcald League could be broken, *then* the Protestants would have to accept the decisions of the reform council. Not only the unity of the church but also the integrity of the empire could be preserved in this way.

## **COUNCIL OF TRENT, 1545-1563**

The council of all Christians which the evangelicals hoped for and the emperor desired was never held. The Protestants wanted it to be held in Germany, where their physical safety could be more easily insured. The Catholics convoked a council at Mantua, instead. Luther and Melancthon prepared *The Smalcald Articles* for that council, but the council was postponed. The Articles, nevertheless, had been adopted by the Lutheran estates; and they are included among the Confessions of our Church.

Continued and repeated attempts to discover unity or restore union were made with no positive results. Finally, in 1545, Pope Paul III convened a council at Trent. Here the doctrinal position of the Medieval Church would be articulated, formalized, and consolidated. There was no longer a question of reunion with Protestantism, of concession to any evangelical calls for reform, or of tolerance for the Lutheran Confession. Instead, a counter-reformation was undertaken with the object of reforming the Roman Church in its organization and in externals, while at the same time reclaiming the lands and peoples who had been lost to the papacy.

### **SHATTERING EVENTS OF 1546**

The Council of Trent began meeting on December 13, 1545. On February 18, 1546 Dr. Martin Luther died in the town of his birth. Announcing Luther's death to the students in Wittenberg, Melancthon concluded: "Let us then hold dear the memory of this man and the doctrine in the very manner in which he delivered it to us."<sup>1</sup> Not only Melancthon's personality but the politics of empire and papacy would fiercely test the Lutheran Church's capacity for remembering and treasuring Luther's doctrine. On June 26, 1546 - sixteen years and one day after the presentation of the *Augustana* - the pope and the emperor compacted to bring the Lutherans and others back into the Roman fold by might of arms. On July 4 Pope Paul III issued a bull which read, in part: "From the beginning of our Papacy it has always been our concern how to root out the weeds of godless doctrines which the heretics have sowed throughout Germany...Now it has come to pass that, by the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, our dearest son in Christ, Charles, the Roman Emperor, had decided to employ the sword against these enemies of God. And for the protection of religion we intend to promote this pious enterprise with all our own and the Roman Church's possessions. Accordingly, we admonish all Christians to assist in this war with their prayers to God and their alms, in order that the godless heresy may be rooted out and the dissension removed...To each and all who do these things we grant the most complete indulgence and remission of all their sins."<sup>2</sup> This call to holy war was a death sentence on the Lutheran Church.

Elector John Frederick of Saxony and Landgrave Philip of Hesse were placed under the imperial ban. Catholic forces marched on Germany, and one by one the cities and territories fell. Maurice of Ducal Saxony defected to the imperial side in the expectation of becoming an elector. John Frederick was defeated and captured at Muhlberg in 1547. Philip surrendered and was imprisoned by the emperor's troops. Wittenberg surrendered to Charles in order to save John Frederick's life. Military resistance to the imperial-papal coalition had been ineffective and was at an end.

### **THE AUGSBURG INTERIM - MAY 15, 1548**

To make the Lutheran estates subservient to Rome, Charles V issued "His Roman Imperial Majesty's declaration regarding the conduct of religious matters in the Holy Empire until the adjournment of the General Council" (Trent). This "meanwhile" arrangement provided that:

The Council of Trent's decisions on doctrine, once its sessions were concluded, were to be accepted as final;

Romanist rites and ceremonies were to be reinstated;  
Papal primacy and the authority of the bishops were to be acknowledged;  
All doctrines were to be understood in the Romanist sense, including the seven sacraments and the teaching of transubstantiation in the mass;  
The Reformation's chief article, on justification by faith alone, was virtually canceled out;

Only two concessions were temporarily allowed: marriage of the Lutheran clergy and the reception of "two kinds" (bread and wine) in the Lord's Supper. 3

And so, two years after Luther's death, the teachings he had won from God's Word were to be silenced by military and political might. And most Protestant princes accepted these terms. Maurice of Saxony, who was not as harmless as a dove in his political moves, naively thought that by accepting the *Interim* he could preserve the evangelical doctrine and practice for his own realm. Lutheran pastors did not generally submit; and measures were taken, especially in the south of Germany, to ensure that they did. Hundreds were banished to the north and others simply left of their own accord. Many were imprisoned and some were killed.

The man who was at that time regarded as Luther's theological heir published an attack on the *Interim* within months. At some risk to his own freedom and safety, Melancthon opposed the imperial declaration.

#### **THE LEIPZIG INTERIM - DECEMBER 22, 1548**

And then he became involved in a compromise which turned out to be the most regrettable act of his life and the root of bitter controversies among Lutherans. The threats of the emperor, the persuasion of Duke Elector Maurice, his concern for the survival of the Lutheran Confession in some form, and his own personality traits all combined to involve him in an authorship which he could never quite live down. The *Augsburg Interim* could not be enforced in Saxony. Neither could the emperor's determination be ignored. By the end of the year Philip had written and Maurice had issued a compromise document.

The *Leipzig Interim* accepted the restoration of the Roman ceremonies. Melancthon called these *adiaphora*, external rites neither commanded nor forbidden by God. Of course, Rome did not regard them as such, and the pastors and people of Germany recognized that these concessions at that time and under those circumstances could only result in a return to the papacy.

Later controversy would focus on this matter of *adiaphora*, but there were other features of the *Leipzig Interim* which reveal that Melancthon was willing to treat justification by faith as a problem in semantics. The document is characteristically Catholic in its treatment of justification as a *process* in which man *cooperates* by *works*. The Interim states "that man is renewed by the Holy Spirit and can fulfill righteousness with his works, and that God will for His Son's sake, accept in believers this weak beginning of obedience in this miserable frail nature...God does not deal with a man as a log, but draws him in such a way that his own will also cooperates."<sup>4</sup> Calvin and Brenz rebuked him privately. Others, especially Mattheus Illyricus Flacius, attacked him publicly.

It is a pleasure to report that Melancthon repudiated the concessions of 1548 in his "Saxon Confession" of 1551; and that in later controversies and writings he upheld the doctrine of justification by faith alone. But his actions in the last months of 1548, with the controversies they engendered, nearly destroyed Lutheranism in the land of Luther.

#### **THE PASSAU PACT - 1552**

The political and military teeth of the *Interims* were drawn when Maurice of Saxony determined to present a united front with his Lutheran brethren against the imperial forces. Charles was caught without an army at Innsbruck, was nearly captured, and agreed to a truce which effectively ended the Smalcald War.

### **THE RELIGIOUS PEACE OF AUGSBURG - 1555**

In substance, though not in words, the Peace of Augsburg anticipated Westphalia's *cuius regio eius religio*. For the first time, the Lutheran Confession was a *religio licita* within the Empire. It had legal status and would be tolerated in those realms where the ruler espoused that confession, but only there. The same agreement which gave the signers of the Augsburg Confession relief also placed them under quarantine. Outward expansion was now a virtual impossibility.

It is important for the purposes of this study that the Peace of Augsburg legitimated "the signers of the *Augsburg Confession*" without distinguishing among Lutherans, Zwinglians or others of the evangelical movement. John Calvin subscribed and wrote to a pastor concerning this action: "And truly I do not reject the *Augustana*, which I signed recently, voluntarily and gladly, *just as its author himself has explained it.*" (emphasis mine) 5 Ominous and portentous words. Ominous because we know how the author explained the teaching concerning the Lord's Supper. Portentous because the *Formula of Concord* would finally have to sort out those who were willing to sign Melancthon's revision of the *Augustana* and those who really confessed what had been presented to the Diet in 1530.

### **COLLOQUY AT WORMS - 1557**

There was respite from external pressure after 1555, but internal disagreement was very soon manifest. Lutheran theologians were aware of this disunity and dissension in their own midst. They met at Frankfurt in June 1557 in order to prepare for a colloquy with representatives of the Roman Catholic Church. They realized the importance of presenting a united front to the papists, but they only succeeded in concealing their differences from the laymen (their earthly rulers). At Worms, in September, the disunity was displayed like dirty linen before the pope's emissaries. The latter refused to discuss anything with people who could not agree on who the real adherents of the *Augsburg Confession* were.

Who were these angry Germans and what were they fighting about? For now, let us say that they were divided into two larger parties. There were the Philippists, followers of Melancthon, representing Electoral Saxony. They were like their leader in trying to build bridges to the Reformed and Romanists both. There were the Gnesio-Lutherans, representing Ducal Saxony, led by a Yugoslavian polymath, determined to preserve Luther's doctrine pure.

Philip Schaff, the Reformed historian, wrote of them: "...They fought as if the salvation of the world depended on their disputes." 6 In a way, it did. For, as we shall see, each of the controversies in some way involved the certainty of salvation. Some of the struggles were concurrent, the adversaries did not always oppose one another along strict party lines, and some men who did great service in dealing with one issue had their names attached to errors in connection with other doctrines.

The tragic figure in the middle of all this confusion, the well-intentioned humanist who caused so much of it, was Philip Melancthon. He took the doctrine which Luther had won from Holy Scripture and he systematized it. Thus he supplied the Gnesio-Lutherans with their body of dogma and their canon of Lutheran teaching. But he also kept revising that dogmatic and kept adjusting the *Augsburg Confession* and compromising the doctrine of the Lord's Supper. And so he led the Wittenberg faculty and many of Germany's theologians astray. He was really the

father of the two contending parties in the Lutheran Church between 1546 and 1580. He himself was released from all controversy and strife as well as from the rigors of theological work in 1560.

### **ANTINOMIAN CONTROVERSY - (1537-1556)**

A close friend and longtime coworker of both Luther and Melanchthon was the most prominent advocate of the teaching that the Law of God plays no part in bringing men to repentance. This is only one aspect of antinomianism (opposition to the preaching of the Law), but the way in which John Agricola set it forth is a clear instance of the truth that no dogma of Scripture is ever *merely* a dogma. Agricola was not dealing in academic abstractions when his *Positions* of 1537 began: “Repentance is to be taught not from the Decalog or from any law of Moses, but from the violation of the Son of God.”<sup>7</sup> That last, unfamiliar, phrase meant to Agricola “...that he who does not for the sake of the kingdom of heaven willingly omit what he should omit, and does not do what he should do, *crucifies Christ anew*.” (emphasis mine)<sup>8</sup> But that *is* Law, showing the Christian his sins of omission and commission! Just this “Law” function Agricola, in the 17<sup>th</sup> Thesis of his *Positions*, assigned to Gospel.

The failure to distinguish between Law and Gospel probably grew out of and certainly led back into a tragically deficient grasp of what sin is and thus of the forgiveness of sins. In *his Brief Summary of the Gospel* <sup>9</sup> Agricola sounded very modern as he defined forgiveness of sins as God’s condoning, not blaming and excusing sin because of ignorance, and man’s resolve “never to sin anymore...; to work out, confirm, and preserve his salvation in fear and trembling.” Articles V and VI address themselves to the aberrations of Agricola and other antinomians, including Andrew Musculus - who accepted correction and “grew up” to become one of the framers of the *Formula of Concord*.

### **ADIAPHORISTIC CONTROVERSY (1548-1555)**

Maurice of Saxony and Melanchthon rationalized the concessions of the *Leipzig Interim* regarding Catholic ceremonies and the Romish observance of the mass as indifferent matters, externals not decided by God’s Word. However, we are told that the people of Germany (both Catholic and Lutheran) did not regard the concessions as mere externals. They regarded them as the first steps in a return to the papacy. And that, of course, is what Charles V and Paul III intended them to be.

Flacius for one recognized this and articulated the principle which the *Formula of Concord* would later incorporate into the Confession: “Nothing is indifferent when confession or offense are involved.” And Johannes Brenz declared, “*Adiaphora* must be judged from their conditions. For if the condition is good, the *adiaphoron*, too, is good; and its observance is commanded. If, however, the condition is evil, the *adiaphoron*, too, is evil, and the observance of it is prohibited.”<sup>10</sup> Article X of the Confession addresses itself to this matter.

### **OSIANDRIAN-STANEARIAN CONTROVERSY (1549-1562)**

There as a gifted man who championed the Reformation as chief pastor of Nurnberg. He was so staunch in his confession that when the *Augsburg Interim* was introduced in his city he resigned, and moved to Koenigsberg in Prussia. Yet, three years after Luther’s death, he publicly taught a doctrine of justification which was quite Catholic and not Lutheran at all. He rejected the teaching that justification is God’s declaration of righteousness, for the sake of Christ’s merit, received by faith, instantaneous and complete. Instead, he taught that the righteousness of Christ’s eternal divine nature is ours by a faith-union, and that this results in a life-long *process* of justification. This, of course, takes away the assurance of salvation. Count Albrecht of Konigsberg called the attention of the whole church to this relapse into Catholicism by inviting

all the Lutheran princes and cities to consider the issue. Osiander died at the height of the controversy, in 1552.

A strange antidote to the error of Osiander was proposed by Francesco Stancarò, an ex-priest who had left Italy because of his Protestant views. He opposed Osiander by maintaining that Christ is our Righteousness only according to His *human* nature, and *not* according to His divine nature.”<sup>11</sup> (emphases mine)

Article III of the *Formula of Concord* addresses itself to the errors of these men and also corrects the deviation of Parsimonius. The latter taught that only Christ’s passive obedience avails for us. Only His suffering can be credited to us because as man He *owed* active obedience to God and thus could not provide any of that for us.

#### **MAJORISTIC CONTROVERSY (1551-1562)**

It is not difficult to see that the article of justification by faith is at stake in the controversy named for George Major, pupil and colleague of Melanchthon at Wittenberg. He confused the clear teaching of the Gospel by omitting the word “alone” in the reference to justification by faith in the *Leipzig Interim*. He confused the teaching further when he insisted that “good works are necessary to salvation.” He was aping Melanchthon, who had said the same thing while adding “as they must necessarily follow reconciliation.” But Major did not speak of good works as necessarily following reconciliation. Rather, he said: “. . .good works *must be present*, not as a merit, but as due obedience toward God.”<sup>12</sup>

As so often happens in controversy, the repudiation of the false view resulted in an extreme statement that may not be as damaging but is certainly foolish. Nicholas Amsdorf, for one, said: “Good works are harmful to salvation.” He was sure that he could cite Luther as authority for this statement. What he overlooked was Luther’s qualification: “if one presumes to be justified by them.” Article IV addresses itself to this issue in particular.

#### **SYNERGISTIC CONTROVERSY - (1555-1560)**

Contemporaneous with the aforementioned four controversies was the very practical question of whether or not man cooperates in any way in his salvation. Melanchthon, again, was at least the uncle - if not the father - of the view that man is in some way capable of cooperating in salvation. In his 1548 edition of the “*Loci*” he went so far as to say “Free will is the ability in a man to apply himself to grace.” Thus, years after Luther’s death he was moving very quickly in the direction of the humanist Erasmus.

But the real champion of synergism in justification was Victorin Strigel. Trying to avoid a doctrine of irresistible grace, reasoning that if man has (unarguably) the capacity to refuse God’s grace then he must (logically) have the capacity to accept, Strigel came up with a “decision theology.” The Wittenbergers and others followed him and defended the doctrine. Article II of the *Formula* resolves this controversy by setting forth what the Bible teaches concerning the capacity and incapacity of man’s free will.”

#### **FLACIAN CONTROVERSY - (1560-1575)**

The man who most vehemently attacked Melanchthon during the adiaphoristic controversy was also the fiercest in condemning Strigel’s synergism. Matija Vlacic, a Yugoslav from Croatia, leader of the Gnesio-Lutherans, implacable foe of Melanchthon’s aberrations, opponent of governmental controls over the church, most accomplished Hebraist of his time (who taught Greek at Wittenberg), author of the 13-volume historical study of the Roman Church’s development known as the “*Magdeburg Centuries*,” and renowned polymath is known to us more familiarly as Matthaüs Illyricus Flacius.

To counter Victorin's synergism he wrote: "I plead that by original sin man is not only wounded, but, as the Scriptures affirm, entirely dead, and his faculties to do that which is good have been destroyed. . ." 13 To exclude all synergism, to emphasize man's utter depravity, to deny that man has any capacity (free will) to decide for God's gift of grace was his worthy aim. To attain it, he fell into the same kind of folly that Amsdorf displayed against Major. He countered the false teaching with an extreme statement that was also false. In a debate with Strigel he asserted that since the Fall original sin is the essence of man, that man's nature is identical with sin, that in conversion a new substance is created by God. Having said it he refused to retract it, and expanded on it. The authors of the *Formula of Concord* dealt with his error in Article I and showed how this would affect our Savior's human nature and thus vitiate His saving work.

### **CRYPTO-CALVINISTIC CONTROVERSY - (1560-1574)**

By the time of Melancthon's death in 1560 the University of Wittenberg was openly teaching a Reformed doctrine of the Lord's Supper. As early as 1540 Melancthon had abridged Article X of the *Augsburg Confession* in such an ambiguous way that the bodily eating and drinking of Christ's Body and Blood could be effectively denied and a spiritual eating by faith taught instead. This was not only a bridge on which to meet the followers of John Calvin. This is the teaching of John Calvin concerning the Holy Supper. Especially in Electoral Saxony, Lutherans were losing their identity and becoming Reformed without necessarily saying so. Germany was full of "crypto-Calvinists," men who were Reformed without openly acknowledging the fact.

Obviously, more than loyalty to Luther, more than subtle theologizing, more than a pet dogma of stubborn Germans was (and is) involved. The clarity and authority of God's Word, the Person of Christ, the understanding of the Sacrament as a means of grace are all involved. Article VII of the Confession deals with the Lord's Supper and Article VIII with the intimately related doctrine of the two natures in Christ.

### **AEPINUS AND THE DESCENT INTO HELL**

Although he did not have much of a following, there was a Lutheran pastor who held a mistaken view concerning the Savior's descent into hell. Aepinus taught that this event was part of Christ's suffering for redemption, that while Jesus' body lay in the tomb His soul underwent the pangs of hell to completely satisfy the wrath of God. Article IX speaks sanely, soberly, and scripturally on this subject.

### **PREDESTINATION**

Although there was no predestination controversy in the Lutheran Church of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Article XI deals with this subject. Because as pastors and teachers we are always tempted to draw rationalistic conclusions which are not warranted by God's Word we are grateful for the evangelical and pastoral way in which the fathers dealt with this doctrine.

### **EARLIEST EFFORTS TO RESTORE UNITY**

In all the controversies *sola gratia, sola fide, sola Scriptura* were at stake. Not just the outward union of the church but the clear testimony of the unconditioned Gospel was endangered. Between the compromising, rationalizing, humanizing Melancthon on the one hand, and the uncompromising, demanding, orthodox Flacius on the other were men who tried to effect a reconciliation. Indeed, the two men themselves went as far as they were capable of going in an attempt to be reconciled. It was not to be, and at last intermediaries were told by Melancthon's son-in-law to leave a tired old man alone.

Some must have recognized, as we can today, that more than a personality clash was involved. There were really two contesting and, at certain points, mutually exclusive theologies living under one name. One of these was an impostor; the other needed some corrective measures. Meanwhile Lutheranism was, in Walther's term, "bleeding to death."

Now was the time for God to move a number of concerned rulers and a number of orthodox but moderate theologians to work for a restoration of peace and unity, of *concordia*. He did send them and they did work for the next 20 years.

#### **FRANKFURT RECESS - MARCH, 1558**

The electoral estates met at Frankfurt-am-Main in 1558 to confirm the election of Kaiser Ferdinand I. As a first step in the 20-year effort to restore union, the evangelical princes asked Melancthon to formulate a document to be subscribed by them. The result, called the *Frankfurt Recess*, was so ambiguous that even Calvin said he could accept it. For that reason, and others, some of the Lutheran princes rejected the document and the situation was worsened rather than improved.

In the following year the *Weimar Book of Confutation* was issued, in which certain errors were identified with the names of the men who espoused them. This naming of names exacerbated that clash of personalities which was making reunion difficult. Also in 1559 the German edition of *Corpus Doctrinae Philippicum* - Melancthon's final word on such issues as Lord's Supper, synergism, and free will - was published. Here was personality and doctrine to aggravate the situation.

#### **NAUMBURG - JANUARY 21, 1561**

At last the laymen did what one must admire them, or at least cannot blame them, for doing. They determined to resolve matters without the theologians. Melancthon had died on April 19, 1560. Not long after that, Elector August of Saxony sent invitations to the Lutheran princes to attend a meeting at Naumburg. The stated purpose of this assembly was to consider unity on the basis of the *Augsburg Confession*. Twenty-one sessions were held, at which nearly all the Lutheran estates were represented. The assembly had to adjourn at last without doing what it set out to do. The reason was that a number of the representatives insisted that the basis of union must be the *1540 Variata* rather than the *1530 Augustana*. Crypto-Calvinism was going public, at last, and it was obvious to the Gnesio-Lutherans that fellowship could not exist between those who confessed the Real Presence and those who spoke of a "spiritual eating by faith."

#### **MAULBRONN CONFERENCE - APRIL 10, 1564**

Immediately after the Naumburg Conference the Palatinate openly avowed its Calvinism. Theologians of Wurttemberg, led by John Brenz and including Jakob Andreae, met with their Palatine counterparts. It was the hope and object of the Wurttembergers to restore Lutheranism in the Palatinate. They failed.

#### **ANDREAE'S FIVE ARTICLES - 1568**

Brenz would not live to see the *Augsburg Confession* expounded and confirmed in the *Formula of Concord*. But his student and colleague, chancellor of the University at Tubingen, became one of the great movers and shakers among those whose efforts God used and blessed to establish an uncompromised Lutheran Confession. Jakob Andreae was born at Waiblingen (Ghibelline) in 1528, son of a blacksmith. He was regarded by many of his contemporaries as an opportunist and many modern historians agree.<sup>14</sup> It should not be overlooked however, that in 1548 this man suffered deposition from his pastoral office at Stuttgart rather than conform to the *Interim*.

In 1567 he prepared his “Confession and Brief Explanation of Several Controverted Articles According to which a Christian Unity might be Effected in the Churches Adhering to the Augsburg Confession.” He persuaded Duke Julius of Brunswick of the usefulness of his articles in 1568 and, at Elector August’s behest, presented them to the Wittenberg faculty in 1569. The “Five Articles” dealt with justification, good works, free will, *adiaphora*, and Lord’s Supper. It was a mild document and stated the doctrines in a positive and conciliatory manner. There was the criticism that it lacked antitheses, that it failed to reject the false teachings which jeopardized the five doctrines under consideration. That this criticism was warranted became clear when the Wittenberg faculty, crypto-Calvinistic to the core, seemed to agree with him in personal consultation but rejected his articles in a public testimonial. Andreae had hoped that if the truth could be agreed to, the false teaching would gradually fall away by itself. It was not going to work that way.

### **THE MEDIATING OR CONCORD PARTY**

Andreae was just one of a group of men who were neither Philippists nor Flacians, neither vacillating compromisers nor abrasive advocates of orthodoxy. That is not to suggest they were anything but orthodox. The outstanding figure among them was Martin Chemnitz. Born the day before Luther’s birthday in 1522 in a village midway between Wittenberg and Berlin, he is honored as “the other Martin.” Without his work, humanly speaking, the Lutheran Confession would have been lost before the end of the Reformation century. His education at Wittenberg was in mathematics rather than theology. But during his 2 ½ years as supervisor of the ducal library at Konigsberg he studied the Scriptures in the original languages and read all of Luther.

Chemnitz and Andreae worked together on the *Brunswick Visitation* in 1568 and it was Chemnitz who especially tried to teach Andreae the importance of antitheses. His chief interest in all the union efforts was that the individual person’s assurance of salvation should be safeguarded. In 1569 the two of them prepared the *Brunswick Church Order* which included statements on the articles in question. They submitted these to various faculties as a proposed basis for concord. Wittenberg and Jena rejected them.

### **ALTENBERG CONFERENCE - (OCT. 20, 1568 AND MARCH 9, 1569)**

Electo August assembled the theologians of Upper and Lower Saxony for a colloquy at Altenberg in October of 1568. For several months discussions were carried on through the ducal mails, but when the parties reconvened in March it was evident that no agreement had been or could be reached. The Jena faculty was accused of disturbing the peace because it pointed out that the *Corpus Doctrinae Philippicum* used the “doctored” version of Article X of the *Augsburg Confession*.

### **CONFERENCE AT ZERBST - (MAY 7, 1570)**

The Lutheran rulers were not ready to give up. At Zerbst they and their theologians rejected Melancthon’s *Corpus Doctrinae* and listed the Ecumenical Creeds, the *Augsburg Confession* with its Apology, the *Smalcald Articles*, and both of Luther’s Catechisms as confessional symbols. The rejection of the *Corpus Doctrinae* was something the Wittenbergers could not tolerate and their new catechism of 1571 was manifestly a Calvinistic document.

### **SWABIAN CONCORD - 1574**

Among the theologians there was one who just would not accept failure in his drive for Lutheran unity. In 1573 Andreae published his “Six Sermons concerning the Divisions which had arisen from 1548 to 1573 among the Theologians of the Augsburg Confession.”<sup>15</sup> He hoped that these could be a basis for union. Martin Chemnitz, and David Chytraeus and Duke Julius of

Brunswick advised him to recast these sermons in the form of theses and then issue them through his Tübingen faculty. This he did and the result was the *Swabian Concord*, in eleven articles. This was really the “first draft” of the *Thorough Declaration* as we know it.

#### **TORGAU ARTICLES - 1574**

Meanwhile, in Electoral Saxony, an assembly of theologians convened to condemn the Calvinistic doctrine of the Lord’s Supper and those who taught it. For that reason, some of the Wittenberg professors withheld their signatures until they were imprisoned. Still, the *Torgau Articles* were not explicit enough in their rejection of error, largely because they still assumed doctrinal agreement between Melancthon and Luther. Meanwhile, in Hesse, the calumny was raised that the Saxons were trying to improve upon the Word of God.

#### **SWABIAN-SAXON CONCORD - 1575**

Andreae and the Tübingen faculty had sent their *Swabian Articles* north to Chemnitz in 1574. They also asked the Rostock faculty and other theologians for possible revisions. David Chytraeus and other members of the Rostock faculty made many changes, even revising two articles. Chemnitz likewise provided some changes and amplifications. The resulting *Swabian-Saxon Concord* was subscribed by the churches of Lower Saxony and then of Swabia. The Swabians were in full agreement with content but were not happy about the heavy style, the Latin phrases and the fact that Melancthon was quoted much more frequently than Luther.

#### **MAULBRONN FORMULA - (JANUARY 19 1576)**

The openly Calvinistic *Wittenberg Catechism* was one more link in a chain of evidence that the electors of Saxony had not wanted to accept. Now at last Elector August commissioned Luke Osiander and Balthasar Bidembach to prepare a statement concerning the errors of the Wittenberg theologians. No individuals were to be named as errorists, Latin and technical terminology were to be avoided, and there were to be no quotations from Melancthon. The last-mentioned sage stipulation was intended to prevent anyone from concluding that Melancthon was a teacher whose judgments may serve as a court of last appeal.

Nine articles were drawn and the document was presented at the cloister of Maulbronn. It was examined, amended, approved and sent to Elector August. The electoral court had received the *Swabian-Saxon Concord* just three weeks before, and it was decided to refer both formulae to Andreae. Andreae advised that from the two formulae a single new formula be prepared.

#### **LICHTENBERG CONVENTION - FEBRUARY 16, 1576**

Elector August hoped that other territories and countries would do what Swabia and the two Saxonies had done and what Andreae was suggesting. That is, each Lutheran estate would submit its own *Corpus doctrinae* to a general meeting for evaluation by theologians, in the presence of lay counselors. From these diverse bodies of doctrine a single formula would be prepared.

Twelve theologians met at Lichtenberg to recommend three measures which should make it possible to do what August and Andreae were suggesting. They were:

1. The entire abandonment of all personal rivalries and causes of complaint.
2. The removal of all hindrances to common harmony, of which the *Corpus doctrinae Philippicum* was mentioned as one, and the publications...whereby Crypto-Calvinistic errors were disseminated, as another. Instead of the *Corpus Philippicum*, the three Ecumenical Creeds, the *Augsburg Confession Invariata*, the *Apology*, the two Catechisms and the Smalcald Articles are recognized as symbolical, with the addition of Luther’s “Commentary on Galatians”, if anyone desires to include it.

3. A conference of theologians is recommended, to judge, in the presence of the electors and princes, according to the norm of Scripture and the received symbols, concerning the points in controversy. Chytraeus, Chemnitz, Andreae, and Marbach are named by this conference as theologians well qualified for the work. 16

Not all the territories chose to participate; but on May 28, 1576 twenty theologians from Saxony, Brunswick, Mecklenburg, Brandenburg and Wurttemberg, gathered at Torgau. They used the *Swabian-Saxon Concord* as a basic document, inserted what was needed from the *Maulbronn Formula*, omitted or translated all Latin phrases, carefully distilled the result, and on June 7 completed their work.

#### **THE TORGAU BOOK - JUNE 7, 1576**

What they produced is remembered as the “Torgau Book.” From then until the following March this document was circulated in the Lutheran territories. Reaction was invited. Some objected to a “new” confession and received the assurance that had already been expressed at Torgau: The articles are only to expound and define the meaning of the *Augsburg Confession*. Where Melancthon’s memory was still revered some objected to the omission of his name and works. Some still thought his views should be respectfully mentioned. There were others who believed that he and others ought to be condemned by name. There was a suggestion that a shorter version, an “epitome,” be published along with the more comprehensive work.

#### **THE BERGEN BOOK - MAY 29, 1577**

In March of 1577, Martin Chemnitz, Jakob Andreae and Nicholas Selnecker met at Bergen Abbey to carefully review the “Torgau Book” and the correspondence regarding it. They made some changes, did some abbreviating, and Andreae prepared the *Epitome*, or *Brief Statement*. They continued to polish the document during April and were joined in May by three more theologians. David Chytraeus, Andreas Musculus (Meusel) and Christoph Cornerus (Koerner) joined the other three in preparing the final revision. They completed their work on May 28 and affixed their signatures on May 29. The Preface, with its important statement on Scriptural authority, was added later. It received its final form at Juterbock in June, 1579.

#### **SUBSCRIPTION OF THE FORMULA**

There had been plans for a general assembly of Lutherans, to be held in Magdeburg, at which the completed *Book* would be submitted for approval. But there were second thoughts, and the six original subscribers were among the thinkers. They feared a renewed controversy would develop at a mass meeting. It was decided to circularize the churches with the confession instead.

They began at Wittenberg on June 15. Then Andreae, Selnecker and Leyser traveled around Saxony getting signatures. In Brandenburg seven regional conventions were held for the reading and subscribing of the *Bergen Book*. The “safe” princes and churches were invited to sign first, with the thought that less “safe” territories would be encouraged to do the same. The university theologians and then the city pastors signed. Two representatives signed on behalf of the country pastors and teachers of each area, and indicated the number of persons for whom they signed. All country pastors and teachers who were present were encouraged to sign for themselves.<sup>17</sup>

Lest there be any conditional signing, the signatories were permitted to indicate only their titles and residences with their signatures. By the time the Formula was published as part of the complete *Book of Concord* on June 25, 1580, it had been signed by three electors, twenty

dukes and princes, twenty-four counts, four barons, thirty-five imperial cities, and 8,188 theologians, pastors and teacher.<sup>18</sup>

Calvinists continued to be Calvinists. The Crypto-Calvinists became Calvinists. Some countries did not immediately accept the Formula but remained Lutheran nevertheless. Others, like England, had never been Lutheran anyway. To answer the charge that a new doctrine had been introduced regarding the Person and Nature of Christ, Chemnitz and Andreae privately published "The Catalogue of Testimonies." In it they documented the fact that their Christology - our Christology - is that of the ancient church and of Chalcedon.

The *Formula* did not create a national church for the Lutherans of Germany. There was no German nation, as such, until 1870. But it did serve as a doctrinal standard, an expression of unity, a means of establishing unity among Lutherans of Germany in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

But what of today? Does it bear upon our concerns? Can its formulations be properly applied to the issues of our day? Is there a connection between the articles of the *Formula of Concord* and the business of witnessing to God's whole truth in our time? In other words, is it relevant? Our district really answered that last June when it adopted this "Whereas": "There is a continuing need for a clear understanding and confession of the 12 articles of doctrine specifically confessed in the Formula of Concord." Still, we are not always convinced and motivated by resolutions in our Synod. For that reason, I hope that what follows will help all of us to better appreciate *that* and *why* and *how* this Confession is still relevant in our time.

We note, first, *the centrality of the doctrine of justification by faith*. Article after article in the *Formula* expresses its concern for the clear and unconditional expression of the truth that by faith in the saving merits of Jesus Christ we have God's favorable verdict. This is the answer to man's agonized question: "What must I do to be saved?" He may not phrase it that way or know that he is asking it. But no matter how he expresses it the answer is the same for every age and generation.

How to answer it, how not to answer it, is part of the instructive value - the relevance - of the Formula. When a popular modern translation of the Bible regularly speaks of God "making" us righteous, it is helpful to be reminded by Article III that God *declares* us righteous, *imputes* Christ's righteousness to us, *regards* us as righteous for Christ's sake. In an age when religionists put so much emphasis on feeling, it is important to believe and teach that the righteousness that is ours by faith in Christ is not based on feeling but on His objective act and His Word. It is important to be able to tell people who can no longer "feel" God's presence in their lives that our justification does not come about through Christ's dwelling in us but by His dying and rising again for us. When neo-pentecostals are urging our people to seek the "second blessing," and "Spirit baptism," how important to have at hand the reminder that faith alone lays hold of the righteousness of Christ which is *all* we need for salvation. How useful to review, in our professional reference work or in devotional reading, the marvelous fact that in the area of justification there really are no new heresies under the sun, that with regard to this central truth, the Confession really *does* have all the answers.

Article IV, with its discussion of good works is still helpful when we help our spiritual charges avoid the notion that "it doesn't matter what you believe as long as you live right" and its insidious converse, "it doesn't matter how you live as long as you believe right." The relationship of works to faith, of sanctification to justification must constantly be reviewed, not just to avoid the errors of Major and Amsdorf but to avoid losing the assurance of salvation for ourselves and those for whom we are accountable.

And so it is, too, with the proper distinction between Law and Gospel which is set forth so clearly in Article V. What is involved is not a dry academic distinction, a stifling orthodox dogma. What is involved is the Gospel, which must not be called on to do the Law's work, which is meaningless if there is no Law, which will be turned into a Law by those who deny the Law its proper function. Luther said it best regarding the antinomians of his time or any time: "By these spirits the devil does not intend to rob us of the Law, but of Christ, who fulfilled the Law." A modern day example of where the denial that God has standards and that those standards have the function of exposing our sin and crushing our spiritual self-sufficiency leads is seen in the "gospel" of revolution which *demand*s (Law function) participation in the *violent overthrow* (Law violation) of unjust regimes and calls that the "Gospel for our time."18a

While we review and treasure the practical and evangelical way Article V teaches the proper distinction between Law and Gospel, we do well to heed this warning from "another Lutheran" too: "The danger with (the Law-Gospel construct), of course, is that such a scheme can petrify and degenerate into a kind of rather cheap psychological gimmickry and manipulation. One might operate as though one could get people into heaven only by first quite literally 'scaring hell' out of them...Much contemporary so-called 'evangelical,' preaching demanding a 'decision for Christ' is the logical outcome of such gimmickry."19

If we do not cite all of the articles in connection with this matter, *of the centrality of the doctrine of justification by faith* it is simply because we must move on. Let it suffice to say that all the articles are concerned to uphold the clarity, the authority, and the certainty of the Word which has at its heart "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

As long as we confess at the beginning of our morning service "that we are *by nature* sinful and unclean," Article I will be relevant. For it reminds us that "nature" was not *created* sinful but that it has *become* sinful by the Fall of our first parents. And so the Epitome (I.1) reminds us that the distinction between our created nature and original (inherited) sin "is as great as the distinction between a work of God and a work of the devil." The origin referred to in *original* sin is not our origin in God's creative act but our origin as children of Adam and Eve. As long as there are educated people who believe that the human race is by nature good (or neutral) and therefore perfectible, the testimony of the Formula will continue relevant. As long as most organized Christianity continues to be semi-Pelagian, the Formula's scriptural witness to man's utter depravity and incapacity in spiritual things will continue relevant.

Not only does Article II remind us that the answer to synergism (the error that man can cooperate in *some* way in his salvation) is *sola gratia*. It reminds us that among all Christians, only Lutherans understand that the means of grace *are* means of grace. Others use them and the means are effective. But the denial of baptismal regeneration, the treatment of the Lord's Supper as a memorial feast, the dissociation of the doctrine of election from the Gospel, the Catholic doctrine that Mass performance and attendance are meritorious works, the Anabaptist treatment of Baptism as a mere act of obedience - all are denials that Word and Sacrament are *means* of *grace*. Thus they, in some degree, detract not only from the means but from the grace. And when a person looks away from the grace of God, he quite naturally looks to *some* cause in himself. He becomes some kind of a synergist.

With regard to our own attitude to the Holy Supper of the Lord, we might reflect a moment on something Melancthon wrote to Calvin in 1538: "There is not a day nor a night for the last ten years that I did not meditate upon the doctrine of the Lord's Supper."19a We will not

judge as to how he meditated. The *Variata* and the Crypto-Calvinistic controversy suggest what the word “meditate” might mean. But let us examine our own attitude toward the Supper.

Do we think of it primarily as nourishment and refreshment for our spiritual strengthening, to be received often and with thanksgiving, because we hunger and thirst after righteousness and here Christ gives us His righteousness? Or does our meditation tend more toward a wrestling with the questions “how” and “why” and “who” and “when”? The Lord did not institute the Supper as a theological riddle for the stimulation of our intellects but as a means of grace. To receive it humbly by faith and to teach our children and adults to appreciate it as “the Gospel in another form” will keep us and them from thinking of it as a sort of appendage to the Church’s message. Then, perhaps, they will be less cheerful about dispensing with the sacrament(s) when they identify with the various “evangelical” groups that hold such an attraction for so many of our people.

It is always timely to emphasize two matters that are brought into focus by Article IX, “Concerning Christ’s Descent into Hell.” The first is that we cannot overemphasize Christ’s and (by faith) our victory over sin, death and hell. In Him we are victors and winners, not failures and losers. The second is that where Scripture has not spoken we must be silent. “For it is sufficient that we know that Christ descended into hell, destroyed hell for all believers, and delivered them from the power of death and of the devil, from eternal condemnation and the jaws of hell. But how this occurred we should reserve until the other world, where not only this point, but also others will be revealed, which we here simply believe and cannot comprehend with our blind reason.” (*Epitome*)

In a time when trial liturgies, experimental worship forms, new translations and new lectionary courses are being considered and attempted and introduced, the first three affirmative theses of Article X seem particularly relevant. This is not in any way intended to pass a negative verdict on the merits of any innovative efforts. It is simply to say that there are some profound, evangelical, scriptural Lutheran principles involved:

1. “...Ceremonies...are in and of themselves no divine worship, nor even a part of it...”
2. “...The congregation of God...has the power...to change such ceremonies in such manner as may be most useful and edifying to the congregation of God.”
3. “...All frivolity and offense should be avoided, and...care...taken to exercise forbearance towards the weak in faith...”

It is simply not possible for now to demonstrate all that is relevant to demonstrate that all is relevant in the *Formula of Concord*. To stop with the particular examples drawn is not to dismiss the rest as irrelevant.

It is surely worth reminding ourselves on the occasion of this 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary that the *Formula of Concord*, like the other Lutheran Confessions, is not merely “The Lutheran tradition” but a *true exposition of the Word of God*. As ministers of the Word we have vowed to conform our teaching to this Confession *because*, not *insofar as*, it agrees with God’s Word. That is why we should not, even in jest, say things like “Our position has changed... will change..., must change.”

We should not say that because if a position is only *our* position then it is subject to change. If it is only *ours* then we are sectarian if we are not willing to change it in order to unite with other Christians. But if it is the position of God’s Word it is not subject to adjustments.

We should not say that our position *will* change because to say that is to say we will inevitably diverge from the truth or apostasize. We do *not* have to recapitulate the experience of

other church bodies, beginning with the Lutherans of Wittenberg and Saxony. We do *not* have to settle for less than full doctrinal agreement before practicing fellowship, or mistake the outward peace of union for God-given unity.

It is not true that our position must *change*. An unsigned article in “Dialog” (Vol. 15, p 169, 1976) says that, because the *Formula* is historically conditioned on the one hand and has been made normative for teaching in the Lutheran Church on the other hand, we have “been captive in sundry half-way houses ever since.” Which doctrine treated in the Formula, we ask, needs to be better attested *from Scripture*? If the Formula does not treat every doctrine (and it doesn’t) what does it teach that is not true? If the terminology used in the treatment of original sin and Christ’s two natures is not perfect, how shall we teach these doctrines with more suitable vocabulary without lapsing into ancient heresies under new labels? If the expression “Third use of the Law” is not entirely apt, the substance of the article is still scriptural and therefore true and therefore eminently practical.

This “Lutheran tradition” is not just one option in the theological cafeteria, which we may take or leave depending on whether our personalities are more like Luther’s or more like Melancthon’s. If this be a true exposition of God’s Word, then those traditions and confessions which are not in agreement with it are false.

Closely related to this is the idea that *though the Formula was conditioned by time, its truth is timeless*. It answers questions which were being asked in its century and it could not take up some of the challenges that have been addressed to God’s Word today. But many of that century’s questions are still ours today, and many others will be relevant again tomorrow, and the answers will not be conditioned by time. They are timeless because they derive from the Word of God which abides forever, which is not relative or changing or historically conditioned. It is no longer good science to say that a magnet rubbed in garlic juice loses its magnetism, but it is still bad theology to say that original sin is only an impediment or minor flaw in man’s nature. Modern exegetes may not agree with the Formulator’s interpretation that Judas was present and received the Lord’s Supper at its institution. But it is still Scriptural truth that all communicants (and not only believers) receive what Christ says we are receiving. Baptists and Schwenckfelders may not be as disorderly today as the followers of Denk and Schwenckfeldt were but some of the errors scored in Article XII are as contemporary as Maranatha Bible Baptist College, the Assemblies of God, and Club 700. “They reject the entire doctrine concerning original sin.” They teach “that...the Word preached and heard is not a means whereby God the Holy Ghost teaches men, and works in them the saving knowledge of Christ...that the water of Baptism is not a means whereby God the Lord seals the adoption of sons and works regeneration...that bread and wine in the Holy Supper are not means through and by which Christ distributes His body and blood...”

The way to deal with such error and such errorists is not to accentuate the positive and concentrate on what they have in common with us and learn techniques from them. The fact that we and Billy Graham have the devil, the world, the flesh, the pope and the pornographers as common adversaries does not serve to make us one. The bridge-building of a Melancthon does not serve to create unity where the Word of God does not have free course and full authority. It only disrupts the unity that exists.

*We serve the church and the world best when we are faithful* in confessing what the 16<sup>th</sup> century fathers confessed. We confess it because it is the Gospel, God’s power to save sinners and unite believers. It is not that America hungers for a conservative theology, or that “it’s what the people want,” or “it works.” This is not a matter of maneuver or tactics or tinkering. We

believe, teach, and confess what the *Formula of Concord* believes, teaches, and confesses because it is true!

It *may* be that Flacius had a porcupine personality that made him go too far in his prickly dealings with Melancthon. But who of us will call him a man of “another spirit” when he writes: “I thirst for...unity with the brethren as the dry land longs for rain, but my conscience is captive to God’s Word. I think and do what I have to think and do.”<sup>20</sup> To speak the truth in love can never mean speaking something other than the truth. Dr. Hermann Sasse has reminded the church that in the same prayer in which our Lord prayed “That they all may be *one*,” He first prayed “Sanctify them through *Thy* truth.” Thus, “The quest for truth and the quest for unity are one.”<sup>21</sup> These are not alternative emphases, depending on our predilections or predispositions.

We have already hinted at the *possibility of new confessions*. Error takes on new forms; new issues arise; new questions are addressed to the confessing church. It becomes necessary to respond with “This We Believe.” It may even be advisable to publish a booklet with that title. It is not that we did not know before what we believe. It is not that we now confess something other than what the church has always believed or the Lutheran church has always confessed.

We would not claim that the special confession we have made as a Synod in “This We Believe” is ecumenical in the sense that all Christians have subscribed to it or that all churches ought to accept its very form. But we must believe that it is ecumenical in the sense that all Christians ought to be in accord with its substance, and in the sense that no part of it conflicts with the church’s ancient creeds. We are not optimistic that our particular confession will become a new symbol for all Lutherans. But we would not publish it if we did not believe its confession to be in accord with the Lutheran Confession and its antitheses to be necessary rejection of errors which have no place in the Lutheran church. To say these things is not to have delusions of grandeur but to take seriously what it means to say “This We Believe.”

The Formulators made clear in the *Preface* that when they said, “This we believe” they were saying it because “This is what Scripture teaches.” Their insistence on *sola Scriptura* is expressed in the *Preface* to the *Book of Concord*, in the *Summary* which introduces the *Epitome*, and in the *Comprehensive Summary* at the beginning of the *Thorough Declaration*. They believed that the fathers provide us with a record of how and where the doctrine of the prophets and apostles was preserved. But history does not establish doctrine. Only Scripture does.

Perhaps more relevant to our present-day relations with other Lutherans is the way in which the confessors at Bergen treated the earlier confessions and the writings of Luther. They would have been stunned by that modern “confessional” Lutheranism which treats the Confessions as *the* standard and interprets Scripture in the light of *them*! Their position is made clear in “Of the Summary Content, Rule and Standard,” 3e: “But the other symbols and writings cited are not judges, as are the Holy Scriptures, but only a testimony and declaration of the faith, as to how at any time the Holy Scriptures have been understood and explained in the articles in controversy in the church of God by those then living, and how the opposite dogma was rejected and condemned.”

An eastern Lutheran understood the connection between the *Formula of Concord* and the Scriptures when he prophesied in the early years of this century: “The modern radical spirit which would sweep away the Formula of Concord as a confession of the church will not, in the end, be curbed until it has swept away the Augsburg Confession, and the ancient Confessions of the church - yea, not until it has crossed the borders of Scripture itself, and swept out of the Word whatsoever is not in accord with its own critical mode of thinking...”<sup>22</sup> The prophecy has long since been fulfilled in his church body and others.

Beginning with those Calvinists who had been willing to subscribe the *Altered Augsburg Confession* and were excluded by the Formula from the company of *Augustana's* adherents, it has been fashionable in Reformed circles to refer to the "Formula of Discord." Philip Schaff, 19<sup>th</sup> century Reformed church historian for whom we have much respect, wrote: "The smallest doctrinal difference among orthodox Lutherans in America is considered sufficient to justify the formation of a new synod with close-union principles. And yet all the Lutherans adopt the Formula of Concord as the highest standard of pure Scripture orthodoxy. Is this *concordia concors* or *concordia discors*?"<sup>23</sup>

As a historian Dr. Schaff must have known that the Formula was intended to unite and that it did effect a more perfect union. As a theologian he must have known that the Gospel, which is intended to unite, also becomes divisive when it is rejected. It is to some a savor of life unto life and to some a savor of death unto death. What he failed to understand about our subscription to this Confession is that we subscribe it *because* it is a true exposition of the Gospel, and that therefore a disagreement in it is a disagreement in the Gospel, and that thus unity is disrupted and there can be no practice of a fellowship which does not exist. The Gospel unites but it also divides. So it is with the *Formula of Concord*.

What was just said reminds us that the Formula is *chiefly* a Gospel testimony, not a Law code. It teaches, encourages, exhorts, through its exposition of what God's grace is, how we receive it, and how it comes to us. Like the Gospel, it is not a handbook for church polity or a worship manual. But, like the Gospel, it motivates and informs our organizational forms and liturgies. If we are Gospel-oriented it will not occur to us that there are some *regulations* in this *Formula* that we (or a brother) might want to evade. Nor will we think of it as a tool for enforcing a doctrinal position among the brethren. But where the truth is being evaded, there the Confession takes on a "Law" function. Then it draws lines and marks boundaries and sets standards. And if that "Law" function is never used to carry out discipline where discipline is indicated, then the Confession becomes just one more tradition among a variety of traditions.

*The confession of truth must include the rejection of error.* This was what Flacius insisted on so vociferously and what Melancthon resisted till his death. This was what Andreae hoped to dispense with and Chemnitz taught him to appreciate. Selnecker came back from Elector August's court and lamented: "I returned with a document which was sound in what it said, but slippery in what it did not say; I so wanted to put the best construction on everything and to be left with no suspicions at all even if I should test it all out personally."<sup>24</sup>

This is not just a matter for subtle theologians or fussy churchmen. All Christians need all the help available in distinguishing truth and error. Especially today Christians need to be protected from the Hinduism, Free-Masonry and secularism (the labels are not important) which begins with "everything is a little true" and proceeds to the despairing "nothing is really true." In the conclusion of the articles in dispute, before the beginning of Article XII, Andreae wrote in the Epitome: "...Every simple Christian, according to the guidance of God's Word and his simple Catechism, can perceive what is right or wrong, since not only the pure doctrine has been stated, but also the erroneous contrary doctrine has been repudiated and rejected..."

In the *Preface* to the *Formula*, which in "Concordia Triglotta" appears as a *Preface* to the entire *Book of Concord*, the Formulators made it clear who and what is being rejected and condemned."...It is in no way our design and purpose to condemn those men who err from a certain simplicity of mind but are not blasphemers against the truth of the heavenly doctrine; much less, indeed, entire churches which are either under the Roman Empire of the German nation or elsewhere; nay, rather has it been our intention and disposition in this manner openly to

censure and condemn only the fanatical opinions and their obstinate and blasphemous teachers...” And so we have that paradox noted by Sasse, of which we are aware, and which we must always be helping the Christians of our churches to understand better: “...The Lutheran church which is faithful to its Confession is the true church of Jesus Christ, and the church of Christ is not limited to the church of the Lutheran Confession.”<sup>25</sup>

That says, of course, that there is a real unity between us and Christians in other churches and church bodies. The Savior’s prayer “That they all may be one” has not been left unanswered. But who those people are who are united with us by faith in Christ cannot be determined by examining their inward faith (which is God’s province) or by their adherence to their church’s confession (which is manifestly false). Thus unity, which is the Holy Spirit’s creation, can only be recognized and acknowledged and expressed where there is agreement in the doctrine of the Gospel. One thing that a faithful study of the *Formula of Concord* ought to teach is that the “doctrine of the Gospel” is not simply the *sola fide*. It is all that God’s Word teaches, because nothing that God’s Word teaches is unrelated to the article of justification by faith alone.

Unity in the doctrine of the Gospel is not simply a like-mindedness or a fellow-feeling. It is God’s gift and it can never be manufactured by us through the establishment of an outward union. Martin Bucer granted Luther’s doctrine of the Lord’s Supper in the *Wittenberg Concordia* of 1536 for the sake of union. Melancthon issued the *Variata* in 1541 for the sake of union. Those and similar actions did not create unity with the Reformed or hide the disunity among evangelicals from the Romanists at Worms in 1557. How tempting and how disastrous for Lutherans in America in our century to declare union where unity in the doctrine of the Gospel does not exist! How tempting for us to practice fellowship with those who are “almost like us.” How urgent must be our prayers that the Holy Spirit bind our consciences to the Word of Truth, as He bound Flacius, Westphal, Marbach, Brenz, and the Formulators!

And what a warning for us in the fact that most of the errorists whose aberrations are dealt with were heroes of or participants in the Reformation. Most of them were members of the Wittenberg faculty, where the Gospel had rained down so benevolently. Luther recognized Melancthon as a wonderful gift of God and often deferred to him in questions of philology. The man really invented and implemented our kind of worker-training. Bugenhagen and Cruciger became extreme Philippists. Agricola was one of the earliest coworkers of Luther and champion of the Reformation but the antinomian never could divide Law and Gospel and helped to formulate the *Augsburg Interim*, as well. Osiander was a brilliant man who served as prefacer and proofreader of Copernicus’ earthshaking “Concerning the Revolutions of the Celestial Orbs.” He was a courageous man, who resigned his Nurnberg charge when the *Interim* was introduced there. He gave his name to an ancient heresy in new garb. Well-meaning Amsdorf with his well-intentioned “good works are injurious for salvation.” And Flacius, who loved unity but loved truth even more, still has a doctrinal error named for him. Surely, the history of those years warns us who have been so wonderfully blessed against ever saying or thinking: “God we thank Thee that we are not like other people.” Rather, our prayer is Selnecker’s:

In these last days of sore distress,  
Grant us, dear Lord, true steadfastness  
That pure we keep, til life is spent  
Thy holy Word and Sacrament.(TLH 292,2)

We have been recipients of providential grace throughout the history of our Synod, as we were reminded in a variety of ways during 1975. We are heirs of a confessional heritage from the

16<sup>th</sup> century which is even more evidently the result of God's gracious providence. The six Formulators and signatories were not perfect in their personal lives or perfectly consistent in their professional lives. We will not catalog the particulars, but simply marvel that the gracious God equipped these six men to do what was needed for the Gospel's sake and for the Lutheran Confession. "This is the LORD's doing and it is marvelous in our eyes."

## ENDNOTES

1. Quoted from O. Thulin, *A Life of Luther*, Philadelphia, 1966, p 129 by Eugene F. Klug and Otto F. Stahlke, *Getting into The Formula of Concord*, St. Louis, 1977, p 9.
2. Quoted in F. Bente, *Historical Introductions to the Book of Concord*, St. Louis, 1921, p 94f.
3. Summarized by Eugene F. Klug and Otto F. Stahlke, *op. cit.*, p 11.
4. Quoted by Theodore E. Schmauk and C. Theodore Benze in *The Confessional Principle and the Confessions of the Lutheran Church*, Philadelphia, 1911, p 595f.
5. Quoted by R. W. Heintze in "Theological Monthly," Vol. 8, p 170 (1928).
6. Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, Vol. III, The Evangelical Protestant Creeds, With Translations, New York, 1905, p 259.
7. Quotation in F. Bente, *op. cit.*, p 169.
8. *Ibid.*, l.c.
9. *Ibid.*, l.c.
10. *Ibid.*, p 111 .
11. *Ibid.*, p 159f.
12. *Ibid.*, p 116.
13. *Ibid.*, p 140.
14. For documentation see Theodore R. Jungkuntz, *Formulators of the Formula of Concord*, St. Louis, 1977.
15. These are available in translation with a helpful introduction, in Robert Kolb, *Andreae and the Formula of Concord*, St. Louis, 1977.
16. Henry E. Jacobs, *The Book of Concord*, Vol. II, Historical Introduction, Appendixes and Indexes, Philadelphia, 1893, p 58f.
17. The information in this paragraph is from Karl Themel, "Dokumente von der Entstehung der Konkordienformel" in *Archiv fur Reformationsgeschichte* 64: pp 287ff, 1973.
18. The last figure is from Theodore G. Tappert, *The Book of Concord*, Philadelphia, 1959, p 464.
- 18a. Carl Braaten in "The Gospel of Justification Sola Fide," *Dialog*, 15:207ff (1976).
19. Gerhard O. Forde in "The Formula of Concord Article V: End or New Beginning?," *Dialog*, 15, p 185 (1976).
- 19a. Schaff, *op. cit.*, p 261.
20. Quoted by Oliver K. Olson in "The Importance of Matya Vlacic," *Dialog* 15, p 205 (1976).
21. In *This Is My Body*, Minneapolis, 1959, p 334.
22. Schmauk and Benze, *op. cit.*, p 685.
23. *Op. cit.*, p 338.
24. Jungkuntz, *op. cit.*, p 97.
25. Hermann Sasse, *Here We Stand*, Theodore G. Tappert transl., Minneapolis, 1946, p 176.