Smalcald Politics and the Smalcald Articles

By Armin J. Panning

"God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform," the hymnist writes. What he is reminding us of, of course, is the great truth that we often cannot see what gracious things God is doing for us through reverses and setbacks, through the frustrations and difficulties that beset our daily life. Only in retrospect can we see how God's good and gracious purpose was served in these difficulties.

One of the continuing frustrations to Luther and the reformers was the difficulty of getting a general council convened to hear the evangelical side. From the earliest days of the Reformation Luther was urging and pleading for such a council. There were many promises and a great deal of talk, but serious planning for a council did not take place until the mid 1530s. And ironically, when it did come, it gave the Lutherans great searchings of heart whether or not they could attend such a council.

Viewed from any angle, councils were a problem for the reformers. Looking at it in retrospect, however, one can see that the delay in calling a council actually served the purpose of giving the Lutherans a reprieve. It gave the evangelical cause a chance to grow and establish itself. And when the convening of a council became a real possibility, the dilemma of whether or not to attend served the wholesome purpose of producing one of the most useful and distinctive of the Lutheran Confessions, the Smalcald Articles. These articles clearly and unequivocally set the Lutherans apart from both the Roman and the Reformed camps. It is the history—yes, even the "politics"—surrounding the formulation of these articles that we have been asked to present.

Augsburg 1530

Though the thought of some sort of league among those who accepted the evangelical truths of the Reformation had been entertained for some time, the need for such an alignment became unmistakably clear after the unfavorable outcome of the Diet of Augsburg in 1530.

Recall that the presentation of the Augsburg Confession by the Protestant princes drew a sharp response. Charles V ordered his theologians to draw up a reply, the *Confutatio Pontifica,* or the "Confutation," as it is generally known.

The Protestant princes were open and adamant in their opposition to the Emperor's stance. Philip of Hesse told the Emperor he would sacrifice life and limb for his faith, and long before the Diet had reached its conclusion, he rode off without asking the Emperor's leave.[1] Margrave George of Brandenburg was no less firm in his declaration: "Rather than deny my God and suffer the Word of God to be taken from me, I will kneel down and have my head struck off."[2] Elector John of Saxony may have been a bit more tactful, but he was just as opposed to accepting the Emperor's Confutation.

It was rather the theologians, led by Melanchthon, who resorted to negotiation and reconsideration and compromise on any points possible. Finally it was Luther from the Coburg who put a stop to these dealings. In a curt letter of August 26 he wrote:

> In short, I am thoroughly displeased with this negotiating concerning union in doctrine, since it is utterly impossible except the Pope wishes to put away his power. It was enough to give account of our faith and ask for peace. Why do we hope to convert them to the truth? … If they reject (our Confession), of what use is it to try to enter into harmony with enemies?[3]

---

[1] *The Cambridge Modern History*, Volume II, "The Reformation" (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1907) p 213.
[2] F. Bente, editor with W. Dau of the *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921) p 23.
[3] E. Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950) p 733.

When it became clear that there was no hope of reconciliation with either the Protestant princes or theologians, Charles handed down the decision that the Protestant faith had been refuted "by means of the Gospel and other writings," ostensibly his Confutation. For the Emperor the matter was settled. The only course open was that the Protestants get back into line, an ultimatum that he laid before them in the September 22 decree:

> Therefore His Imperial Majesty, for the benefit and prosperity of the Holy Empire, for the restoration of peace and unity, and for the purpose of manifesting His Majesty's leniency and special grace, has granted to the Elector of Saxony, the five Princes, and the six Cities, a time of grace from now until the 15th day of April next year in which to consider whether or not they will confess the other articles together with the Christian Church.…[4]

According to the terms of the recess, the Lutherans were not to make propaganda for the evangelical interpretation in new books or publications; they were not to hinder anyone from Catholic worship; they were rather to help in suppressing Anabaptists and others who held unconventional points of view. Theologically, the matter was closed.

There remained, however, the nagging problem of the *gravamina*, the list of grievances that the Germans (both Catholic and Lutheran) had against the Church. The reform of these grievances had not been treated at Augsburg. In order to make good that defect, Charles promised to try to effect the calling of a general council. His hope was to have the pope summon a council within six months and to have the council convene within a year after that. Charles could, of course, have no inkling that it would be fifteen years (Trent 1545) before that plan would be realized.

April 15, 1531

With April 15 as the deadline for filing our income tax returns, we tend to think of that day as something of a day of accounting to our government. Such an accounting, however, is nothing when compared to the accounting which the Lutherans seemed legally required to give to their sovereign on April 15, 1531.

In the aftermath of the September decree at Augsburg, after the Protestant princes had gone home, a rump session remained. In a November decree originating from these sessions Charles declared his intention of using force if the Lutherans did not comply. At long last the edict of Worms was to be enforced and cases involving church property secularized by evangelicals were to be decided by the imperial supreme court, where a verdict against the Lutherans was a foregone conclusion.

The situation was clearly critical for the Lutherans. How were they to respond in view of their total unwillingness to deny the faith which they had set forth in the Augsburg Confession? Their course of action was to band together into a league.

But that too was fraught with serious questions. On what basis could a military league be formed? The reformers had consistently counselled against the use of force and against resistance to duly constituted authority. A solution to this knotty problem was arrived at in the decision that the league was to be purely defensive. After preliminary meetings in December 1530, the Smalcald League was officially formed on February 27, 1531. Meeting in the little town of Smalcald, on the border between Saxony and Hesse, the evangelical leaders signed a six-year defensive alliance stating: "On all occasions that any of us is attacked for the Word of God and the doctrine of the gospel or for any other thing connected therewith, all the others will come to his aid at once so far as possible and will assist in delivering him."[5]

Bound by this agreement were Philip of Hesse, Elector John of Saxony, the dukes of Brunswick and Lueneberg, the prince of Anhalt, the two counts of Mansfeld; as well as the cities of Strassburg, Constance, Memmingen, Lindau, Ulm, Reutlingen, Biberach, Isny, Luebeck, Magdeburg and Bremen. The inclusion of the

---

[4] *Ibid*., p 734.
[5] *The Cambridge Modern History*, Volume II, "The Reformation" (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965) p 350.

"Tetrapolitan" cities of Strassburg, Constance, Memmingen and Lindau shows the participation of the South Germans under the influence of Martin Bucer. The Swiss under Zwingli declined to join.

One might be inclined to conclude that it was this rather formidable block of opposition confronting Charles that influenced him not to act against the Lutherans when April 15 came. No doubt it contributed, but it was not the whole reason. There were other factors as well, one of which was the disunity among the German Catholic princes. Only Elector Joachim of Brandenburg and Duke George were willing to risk all-out war against the Lutherans. Pollard states the danger succinctly: "Each Catholic prince desired the suppression of heresy, but no one would set his face against the enemy for fear of being stabbed in the back by a friend."[6]

Then, too, there were formidable foes outside Germany, such as the Turk, against whom the Lutherans could be helpful. "Without the help of the heretics it seemed impossible for Charles to resist the approaching Turkish onslaught; and the Emperor's confessor, Loaysa, urged him not to trouble if their souls went to hell, so long as they served him on earth."[7]

So April 15 came and went, without any attempt on the part of Charles to enforce the Augsburg ultimatum—and the Lutherans were not about to ask any questions, at least not of the Emperor. But there were some questions among the evangelicals themselves, particularly in regard to membership in the newly formed Smalcald League.

The League was defensive. It was an agreement among members to protect one another if their gospel beliefs were attacked. But who were the true believers? Who was eligible for such protection? Who was eligible to join the league? These were questions that vexed the Smalcald League members, for it soon became evident that particularly Philip of Hesse held a much broader view of who could be included in the League than did, for example, the Saxon elector and the Wittenbergers.

Philip was not convinced of the necessity of restricting the League's activity to defensive measures, nor did he feel that membership necessarily required total agreement in all points of the gospel that was to be defended. Specifically, Philip saw advantages in aligning all evangelicals into one league, and under its aegis he would have included also the Swiss, even with their aberrant view of the Lord's Supper, et al.

Working hand in glove with Philip of Hesse was the Strassburger Martin Bucer, who always saw himself and his South Germans as the ones uniquely qualified, both by geography and theology, to be bridge-builders between the North Germans and the Swiss.

This tension between an "inclusive" view and an "exclusive" view of membership in the Smalcald League was to remain a dominant feature during virtually all its days, but for the moment, in 1531, any thought of expansion carne to an abrupt halt in the dramatic turn of events at Kappel.

In his attempt to consolidate Switzerland for the evangelical cause, Zwingli provoked a war with the five conservative (i.e. Catholic) forest and mountain cantons. They promptly enlisted the help of Ferdinand of Austria, Charles' brother and viceroy of the Empire. In the battle of Kappel (October 11, 1531) the Swiss evangelicals were signally defeated and Zwingli himself was killed.

Given his way, Ferdinand would have followed up this success with a campaign against the Smalcald League. Amazingly, however, it was Charles who kept him from doing so. It was not that Charles had come to repent of his hard line against the Lutherans at Augsburg. It was politics, pure and simple. At this time three great enemies confronted Charles, and he was not minded of his own volition to add the Lutherans as a fourth.

Peace of Nuernberg 1532

France was an inveterate foe of the Empire. For centuries the French Valois line had been sparring with the house of Hapsburg. In 1532 Francis I of France was thinking of invading the Empire to recover some of the disputed territory.

In 1532 Clement VII was occupying the papal throne. A member of the Medici line, he was anything but a reforming pope. Hence it is understandable that he should be irritated at Charles' growing insistence on

[6] *Cambridge Modern History*, Vol. II, p 217.
[7] *Ibid*., p 217.

having a general council to deal with the impressive list of grievances presented him by his German subjects. Clement "was haunted by the suspicion that a council might be as fatal to him as that of Basel had threatened to be to his predecessors."[8] So uneasy was Clement that he was considering forming an alliance with Francis I to avert the dread possiblity of being forced by Charles to call a council.

And on the eastern edge of the empire hunkered Suleiman the Magnificent with his relentless horde of Turks, now menacing Vienna.

Faced with these three formidable foes, Charles considered it the better part of valor to make overtures to the Lutherans. While the Smalcald League was a defensive league and thus pledged not to resist duly constituted authority, it was, however, not inclined to sell its loyalty too cheaply either. Therefore, when the Emperor put out feelers as to the conditions on which the Smalcald League would be willing to take part in a campaign against the Turk, the Lutherans expressed two conditions. Charles was to scratch from the supreme court agenda all those cases involving disputes over church property which the Lutherans had secularized. Secondly, Charles was to call a general, free, Christian council which was to meet on German soil.

The diet, meeting at Regensburg in 1532, where these proposals were discussed, refused to ratify the arrangement with the Smalcald League. In private negotiations, however, held in the city of Nuernberg, Charles accepted both conditions. In exchange for help against the Turk, Charles agreed to quash the court cases and he renewed his promise to try to have a council announced in six months and convened within a year. Until such a council met, the Smalcald League members would be free to practice their faith. To be sure, Lutheranism was still living on borrowed time, but it now had a legal basis on which to exist until the convening of a council. No one could know that a council was still more than a dozen years away.

Charles tends to get considerable bad press in our circles. Perhaps this is the place to put in a word for his integrity. Though the Peace of Nuernberg was a private arrangement, an unpublished treaty, yet Charles continued to honor this under-the-table agreement for over a decade. Only after the convening of the Council of Trent (1545) did he use force against the Lutherans in the Smalcald War of 1546. Many a duly signed and published treaty has not fared as well.

And on their part, the members of the Smalcald League kept their share of the bargain. The Lutherans rendered yeoman service to Charles in his campaign against the Turk. Of the eighty thousand troops the Emperor put into the field, some twelve thousand were from the Smalcald League. Nuernberg even sent double its quota of men. Smalcald soldiers fought shoulder to shoulder with imperial troops, and together Protestant and Catholic drove back Suleiman's force, estimated at a quarter of a million men.[9]

Charles' success against the Turk had the adverse effect, however, of drawing his other two enemies closer together. The proposed alliance between France and the pope became a reality, sealed by the marriage of Francis' son Henry to Catherine de Medici, niece of Clement VII. Against the combined opposition of France and the papacy there was no hope of convening a general council—and also no honorable way of suppressing the Lutherans who at Nuernberg had been promised peace until the convening of a council.

Lutheran Expansion

Theoretically, with no prospect for an early council, the need for a defensive alliance such as the Smalcald League should now have been lessened. There was, however, no slacking off in its activity. This was due largely to the ambition of Philip of Hesse. It has already been mentioned that Philip was not minded to restrict membership in the League only to those who agreed fully in their understanding of the gospel. Nor was he comfortable with the limitation of using military might only for defensive purposes after the pure gospel had been attacked.

As a matter of fact, Philip had no compunctions at all about letting armed force come to the aid of evangelical expansion. Perhaps the most blatant example of this would be his invasion of the duchy of Wuerttemberg to help restore the Lutheran duke Ulrich to power. In doing so, Philip gained that very sizeable

[8] *Ibid*., pp 216, 217.
[9] *Ibid*., p 218.

territory for the Lutheran fold, to the consternation of both pope and emperor. Though such aggression was totally foreign to the purpose for which the Smalcald League had originally been formed, it was a masterly stroke of politics, and Pollard no doubt reflects accurately the contemporary evaluation of the coup when he says, "It was no wonder that men declared that Philip of Hesse had done more for the Reformation by his Wuerttemberg enterprise than Luther could do in a thousand books."[10]

With such credentials to commend him, Philip soon became the patron of all the cities and states that had any inclination to come over to the evangelical side. And Philip missed no opportunity to use the emperor's every setback and disadvantage as an occasion to press for the admission of new members into the Smalcald League, and with it, also the privilege of sharing in the benefits of the Peace of Nuernberg.

Though Philip's tactics caused considerable uneasiness in Saxony and Wittenberg, it was a time of significant expansion for the Reformation. Added to the evangelical camp were such cities and states as Goslar, Brunswick, Goettingen, Lueneberg, Bremen, Hanover, Mecklenburg, Anhalt and Pomerania.

With success Philip became more openly critical of Saxon religious scruples, and Wittenberg came ever more seriously to question the morality of Philip's use (or misuse) of the League's military resources. Grimm says: "During the turbulent decade following the Peace of Nuernberg, the fiery and headstrong Philip of Hesse emerged as the leader of the Smalcald League, overshadowing and often in conflict with the new elector of Saxony, the cautious and pious John Frederick."[11]

Things deteriorated to the stage where both Landgrave and Elector threatened not to renew their membership in the League. There was even talk of Hesse, Wuerttemberg and the South Germans forming their own league. All this freewheeling politics came to an abrupt halt, however, when it became evident that the two sides needed each other to face the very real possibility of having to answer to a council.

Wittenberg Concord of 1536

Peace for the evangelicals depended on Charles' inability to convene a council as promised in the Peace of Nuernberg. That inability, as we have seen, was caused largely by the opposition of France and the papacy in alliance. But all of that changed in 1534 with the accession of Paul III to the papal chair.

Pope Paul III was not a true reforming pope, but he was not totally averse to reform either. Perhaps his most positive step toward reform was appointing reform cardinals, whose urgent advice to him was the calling of a council to alleviate some of the grievances that were being felt throughout the Church. Soon papal agents were moving about, testing what reception the calling of a council might receive. For example, in February of 1535 a papal representative appeared even on Luther's doorstep. Luther, incidentally, told him that he would attend the council, "even if I knew you would burn me."[12]

The realization dawned on the Lutherans that at long last there might really be a council, and that realization brought with it the determination to patch up matters in the Smalcald League. As always, Martin Bucer was the catalyst for merger and union. His task was nothing less than to try to reconcile the Zwinglian tendencies of the South Germans and Hesse with what he viewed as a somewhat intransigent orthodoxy in Wittenberg.

With his customary enthusiasm and energy Bucer applied himself to the task, producing a booklet which was to represent Protestantism to the Catholic side, and a polemical tract which was to set the Protestants apart from the Anabaptists. Melanchthon was immediately captivated by Bucer's plan for evangelical union. While Luther initially was more cautious, even he was forced to take notice when in early 1536 the more extreme Zwinglians began to turn against Bucer.[13] This was Luther's cue that Bucer's work merited serious consideration, and by letter he invited Bucer, Capito and other Reformed theologians to meet with him and the Lutherans at Eisenach on May 14, 1536.

---

[10] *Ibid*., p 218.
[11] H. Grimm, *The Reformation Era* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1973) p 175.
[12] *The New Cambridge Modern History*, Vol. II, p 171.
[13] Schwiebert, *op. cit.*, p 737.

When Bucer and his theologians arrived at Eisenach, no one was there to receive them, so they continued on toward Wittenberg. Enroute they learned that Luther was ill, but they continued on to Wittenberg nonetheless.

In the week of meetings that followed, Luther at first was wary and unreceptive, but gradually he became convinced that Bucer and the Reformed were serious in their willingness to conform to Lutheran doctrine. A maj or breakthrough was the disclosure that the South Germans were willing to accept the Augsburg Confession and Apology, in effect shelving their *Tetrapolitana*. The other concession was that Bucer admitted he had changed his view in regard to the reception of Christ's body and blood by the "wicked." He stated that he now realized the reception of Christ's body and blood was not dependent on the faith of the recipient. Unworthy guests do indeed receive the body and blood, he agreed, but to their judgment. With that understanding Melanchthon was ordered to draw up a set of articles which would reflect the new-found unanimity. These articles subsequently came to be called the Wittenberg Concord.

There is, however, a darker side of the Concord that must be noted. Either it was not expressed clearly, or not pursued fully enough, but subsequently it became evident that Bucer had allowed himself a serious reservation in the matter of the "wicked" receiving Christ's body and blood. He divided the "wicked" into two categories. He conceded that "unworthy" guests at the Lord's Supper do indeed receive the Lord's body and blood, but he continued to believe that total unbelievers receive nothing at all.

The wording of Melanchthon's article on the Lord's Supper in the Wittenberg Concord, unfortunately, did not expose this Zwinglian reservation. It was a defect destined to cause serious problems later in connection with the matter of adopting Luther's Smalcald Articles.

The Wittenberg Concord, however, was not a failure. In bringing the South Germans closer to true Lutheranism it separated them from the Swiss. It furthermore served to lessen the tensions within the Smalcald League. But by no means did the Concord solve the problem of a subtle Zwinglianism that pervaded much of the League.

If the theologians were not entirely agreed on doctrinal matters, even less were the princes agreed in the political realm. The Cambridge Modern History offers this evaluation:

> The Concord of Wittenberg only stopped for a while the rifts which had begun to appear in the Schmalkaldic Union … Philip had always inclined to Zwinglian views and resented dictation from Wittenberg … and there were personal as well as religious differences between John Frederick and Philip of Hesse. Philip expressed contempt for the dull but honest elector, while John Frederick had grave doubts about Philip's orthodoxy and the morality of his policy.[14]

Such a state of affairs was hardly conducive to the teamwork that would be required for the League to present its case before a council, but give answer they must.

Mantua, May 1537

As already mentioned, papal opposition to the calling of a council was considerably lessened with the accession of Pope Paul III. When Francis I of France also appeared to be agreeable to a council, the stage was at long last set for convening such a body.

On a visit to Rome by Charles V the calling of a council was agreed upon. The papal bull announcing it set May 1537 as the time and the city of Mantua, an imperial city on the southern slope of the Alps, as the place. A subsequent bull more clearly indicated the task of the council.[15] Its threefold assignment was: to reform abuses in the Church, to deal with heresy and to mount an all-out offensive against the Turk. The papal bull left no doubt what was meant by dealing with heresy. It intended nothing less than "the utter extirpation of the

[14] *Cambridge Modern History*, Vol. II. p 234.
[15] *De Reformation Curiae*, September 23, 1536.

poisonous, pestilential Lutheran heresy." Hence, Protestants were now faced with the problem of responding to a council far different from what they had been demanding.

Luther's immediate reaction still was to go to the council. He had already earlier stated clearly his reason in his reply to the papal legate Vergerius. He had told him bluntly: "We do not need a council for ourselves and our adherents, for we already have the firm Evangelical doctrine and order; Christendom, however, needs it, in order that those whom error still holds captive may be able to distinguish between error and truth."[16]

In general, the theologians felt an obligation to attend. They deplored the fact that the council was not *general*, because only Catholic prelates were being invited. It was not *free*, because not everybody's opinions and convictions were being sought; some were to be "extirpated" as heretics. And it was not *Christian* because papal power and canon law were to be the authority, not the Word of God. And yet, the theologians felt a strong obligation to testify to their faith.

It was the princes who were most insistent on not attending. It was all well and good for theologians to testify to their faith, but princes must protect the life and property of their subjects, they argued. Hence in July of 1536 the Elector John Frederick, through his chancellor, formally asked an opinion of his Wittenberg theologians as to whether he could even receive the papal legate who was rumored to be coming to present the summons to a council.

It was not actually a bona fide question, however. John Frederick also sent along the answer. He felt strongly that one could not even receive the papal legate without thereby tacitly acknowledging the pope's authority and right to call the council.

Despite their Elector's broad hint, the theologians disappointed him in their answer. In their August 6 reply the theologians stated their opinion that receiving the papal legate was not the equivalent of acknowledging the pope's authority. They reasoned that one should at least hear the papal legate to see whether the Lutherans were being invited as participants or being cited as heretics. They argued: "We have always appealed to a council. What manner of suspicion, therefore, would be aroused with His Imperial Majesty and all the nations if at the outset we would summarily decline a council, before discussing the method of procedure!"[17]

This answer was a total disappointment to John Frederick, and in iii humor he personally delivered to the Wittenberg theologians a memorandum categorically expressing his opinion that the Lutherans were not obligated to attend the council. The opponents could not be trusted, he insisted; hence it would be inadvisable to appear at their council.

That nothing connected with attending a council be left undone, however, he ordered Luther to draw up a document detailing the essentials of the evangelical doctrine, articles of faith from which he (Luther) could not recede. In another section he was to indicate where some concessions might perhaps be possible. After Luther had finished his document, it was to be signed by the Wittenberg theologians and then presented for acceptance to all the evangelicals at the League meeting soon to be held at Smalcald. A hint as to what additional use the Elector might have envisioned for these articles is given us in the fact that his memorandum also stated that he was seriously thinking of calling an opposition council (*Gegenkonzil*) to the one in Mantua.

This time the theologians' response to the Elector's proposal was somewhat more favorable. While they discouraged the idea of an anti-council, they agreed to the idea of having a document that would list the essentials of the Lutheran faith, articles they would defend with life and limb. Luther obviously entered into the spirit of the thing, for his signature to the proposal reads, "I, too, Martin Luther, will help with my prayers and, if necessary, also with my fist."[18]

Luther received the Elector's assignment to prepare these articles in late August 1536. For a number of reasons he went at the task with special enthusiasm when he finally was able to begin. For one thing, he felt his death was near, and he wanted to leave behind these articles as a "testament" to subsequent generations stating

---

[16] Bente, *op. cit.*, pp 47, 48.
[17] *Ibid*., p 50.
[18] *Ibid*., p 52.

what his teaching and doctrine had been. Then, too, Luther was convinced that the situation had changed since the Diet of Augsburg in 1530. Melanchthon's mildness (*Leisetreterei*) toward the papacy had been appropriate enough under the circumstances, but what was needed now, he realized, was a strong statement exposing the papacy for what it was, a tool of the devil, the very Antichrist.

The articles were finished in December and by year's end Luther's colleagues, Melanchthon, Bugenhagen, Jonas and Cruciger, together with the invited theologians Spalatin, Amsdorf and Agricola, discussed them and made slight changes and improvements. All eight signed the articles, but Melanchthon with a significant reservation. Together with his signature he stated:

> But regarding the Pope I hold that, if he would allow the Gospel, his superiority over the bishops which he has otherwise, is conceded to him by human right (*iure humano*) also by us, for the sake of the peace and general unity of those Christians who are also under him, and may be under him hereafter.[19]

With the situation requiring a strong statement against the papacy, it is evident that the Elector made no mistake in delegating Luther, and not Melanchthon, to write the articles.

As for the Elector, he was delighted with the articles and immediately made plans to have each evangelical prince bring with him two or three theologians who were to study the articles and subscribe to them at the forthcoming League meetings to be held at Smalcald.

Smalcald, February 1537

From the first Elector John Frederick had in mind to have Luther's articles accepted by the Smalcald League and elevated to something of a touchstone whereby to test the teaching of those who professed to accept the Augsburg Confession and claimed for themselves the protection of the League. This plan had serious opposition from the start because of the Zwinglian leanings of many of the League's members, notably Bucer and the South Germans, as well as Philip of Hesse.

Recall that only a year before in Wittenberg there had been a meeting of the Saxon theologians with Bucer and the South Germans to adjust some Zwinglian tendencies in the Bucerians. This had been accomplished only very imperfectly, due to the ambiguous wording of the Wittenberg Concord and the reservations of Bucer regarding "wicked" recipients of the Lord's Supper.

Luther's Smalcald Articles were indeed written not only against the papacy but also, as he himself indicates in his later *Preface* to the Articles, against "false brethren that profess to be on our side."[20]

The full strength of Luther's leadership would have been needed for the success of the Elector's plan, but Luther unfortunately became ill and had to leave Smalcald without attending any of the official sessions. Melanchthon immediately made the most of this situation. On the first day of the sessions Melanchthon got next to Philip of Hesse and voiced his personal dissatisfaction with Luther's articles, particularly his treatment of the Lord's Supper. He confided to the Landgrave: "One article, that concerning the Sacrament of the Holy Supper, has been drawn up somewhat vehemently, in that it states that the bread *is* the body of the Lord, which Luther at first did not draw up in this form, but, as contained in the [Wittenberg] Concord, namely, that the body of the Lord is given with the bread."[21]

Melanchthon had a point. Luther had at first followed the wording of the Concord and written, "that the true body and blood of Christ is under the bread and wine," but he sharpened that to read, "that the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper are the true body and blood of Christ."[22]

---

[19] *Concordia Triglotta*, p 501.
[20] *Ibid*., p 455.
[21] Bente, *op. cit*., p 55.
[22] *Ibid*., p 55.

Philip of Hesse, with Zwinglian leanings of his own and with a consuming desire to have the Smalcald League as large and inclusive as possible, was won immediately to Melanchthon's suggestion of scuttling Luther's articles. And the Landgrave had no trouble in getting approval for the idea of using as the League's doctrinal statement the Augsburg Confession and the Apology understood in the sense allowed by the Wittenberg Concord wording.

At first sight it would seem that Melanchthon's shenanigans had won the day. But did they really? In reviewing the Augsburg Confession and Apology, the League took notice of the fact that nowhere in the Confession was there any strong statement against the arrogant claims of the papacy. Melanchthon was now directed to make good that defect. Hence, Melanchthon was actually being ordered to undo his former "pussy-footing" (*Leisetreterei*) in the Augsburg Confession.

And he was also being forced to recant his qualified subscription to Luther's articles. The spirit of the Smalcald meetings was such that there was no way Melanchthon could throw a sop to the Catholics by allowing the pope to rule by human right (*iure humano*). Though he later complained about the constituency of the assembly as being "unlearned" and "vehement," Melanchthon conformed to their will. In his *Tract* against the pope and the bishops, he drew up a document that in every feature reflected the strong stand of Luther which he had sought to suppress.[23]

But what about Melanchthon's flirting with the Zwinglians? Did he not here, however, steal a march on Luther by keeping the Reformer's strong Lord's Supper articles off the assembly agenda? Not really.

After all the other business of the Smalcald meetings had been finished, Bugenhagen called together the theologians and invited them voluntarily to subscribe to Luther's articles. To Melanchthon's chagrin, all but five of the assembled theologians signed. Led by Bucer, four other South Germans declined to sign, stating as their reason that they had no authorization from their magistrates to do so. Everyone present, however, knew the real reason. Luther's articles had smoked out some "false brethren that profess to be on our side."

Interestingly enough, the documents officially subscribed by the assembly, the Augsburg Confession and the Apology, received 32 signatures, including those of the South Germans. Luther's articles received 44. His may fairly be called the true "Smalcald Articles."

As we have seen, these articles were composed and subscribed amid a great deal of intrigue and party rivalry—politics of the basest sort. And yet, from their very beginning, the Smalcald Articles have served admirably as a bulwark against both Romish and Reformed influence.

Before Luther left for Smalcald, assuming that he would be presenting his articles, he assembled the Wittenberg congregation and urged them to prayer, stating, "The bell which is to be cast will ring through all the world and through posterity."

Luther's words have proved to be prophetic. The Smalcald Articles have indeed gone out into all the world and have, by God's grace, come also to us, Luther's "posterity."[24]

But we live in a day of divisions and denominations such as Luther could hardly have imagined. There is always the danger of following the siren call of one or the other aberration and thus swerving from a true evangelical course.

Or perhaps even more insidious in the ecumenical climate in which we live is the temptation to submerge our differences—to forget about what is unique and distinctive in our confession and to compromise and seek "unity" on the basis of what is common.

Both dangers are real, but as confessional Lutherans we have a benchmark, a reference point, a place to which we can return again and again. It is the Scripture-based stand set forth in Luther's Smalcald Articles. Or to use the Reformer's own imagery, like a bell these articles peal forth and sound out in all directions, summoning us to scriptural and confessional integrity. God grant that we always hear and heed!

---

[23] *Ibid*., p 54.
[24] *New Cambridge Modern History*, Vol. II, p 172.