

# The Augsburg Confession and the Confessional Principle

Churchman 94/4 1980

**Robin A. Leaver**

In recent years Lutherans, particularly in America and Germany, have been re-examining their confessional inheritance. In 1977 the four hundredth anniversary of the compilation of the Formula of Concord was celebrated in a variety of ways. Not least was a succession of publications investigating the background of the document, its compilers, theology and later influence.<sup>1</sup> The Formula was created in order to bring unity to the Lutheran churches which had been divided by various doctrinal controversies following Luther's death in 1546. Although confessional in form, the Formula was not regarded as a replacement of the Augsburg Confession but rather as an amplification and clarification of certain doctrines implicit in the earlier confessional document. The formulators wrote: 'Herewith we again whole-heartedly subscribe this Christian and thoroughly scriptural Augsburg Confession . . . And we do not intend . . . to depart from the aforementioned Confession or to set up a different and new confession.'<sup>2</sup> Last year, 1979, the celebrations centred on the four hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Diet of Speyer (1529) at which Lutherans presented their 'Protest', an action that earned for them the appellation 'Protestant'.<sup>3</sup> 'In matters which concern God's honour and the salvation and eternal life of our souls, every one must stand and give account before God for himself.'<sup>4</sup> This protest led on to the confession of the following year.

The year 1980 is a double anniversary. In the first place it marks the four hundredth anniversary of the publication of *The Book of Concord*, the volume containing all the confessional writings of Lutheranism: the Apostolic, Nicene and Athanasian Creeds, the Augsburg Confession with its Apology, Luther's Schmalkald Articles and Melancthon's Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, Luther's Small and Large Catechisms, and the Formula of Concord.<sup>5</sup> However, celebrations have centred on the Augsburg Confession, which was presented at the Diet of Augsburg 450 years ago in 1530. In Augsburg itself the actual anniversary has been marked by an intensive period of conferences, lectures, concerts, an exhibition, etc., arranged by the Lutheran Landeskirche in Bavaria and all focusing on the Augsburg Confession.

The Augsburg Confession was presented to the Diet on 25 June 1530 as a statement of the theological position of the 'evangelicals', as they were known. The document dealt with the fundamental doctrines which were confessed and taught by the Lutherans and also the abuses current in the contemporary church which they had corrected. Although the document was drafted by Melancthon it should not be regarded simply as a measure of his own theological concerns. The Confession represents the culmination of a process of discussion and consultation among churches, theologians and princes over a number of years.<sup>6</sup> This consensus expressed itself in the opening words of the Confession: 'Our churches teach with great unanimity that . . .'<sup>7</sup>

Thus the Augsburg Confession was the first in a long line of confessional documents produced in the Reformation era. It is not merely a set of theological propositions but a confession of faith. Faith involves an understanding of the gospel; the gospel involves an understanding of the nature of God, the nature of man and the person and work of Jesus

Christ. So the Augsburg Confession begins with the six fundamental themes: God, Man, Redemption, Justification, Faith and the New Life (Arts. I-VI). Then follows an outline of the context within which such fundamental themes are experienced: the worldwide fellowship of the church, created by the Holy Spirit and governed by Christ alone (Arts. VII-XV). But Christians are also citizens of the world as well as members of the church and therefore have responsibilities in society (Arts. XVI-XXI). However, it is made clear that man's 'good works' in society are the fruit of faith and can never produce faith. The second half of the Confession (Arts. XX-XXVIII) concerns the abuses in the contemporary church which the adherents of the Confession had removed as being inconsistent with the understanding that in salvation the initiative is always with God and not with man.

The impact of this confession of faith was not confined to Germany alone; many European Christians, including those in England, came under its influence as it helped to shape theological thinking and ecclesiastical practice. Hardwick wrote:

It was this remarkable document which suggested the idea so generally adopted in the middle of the sixteenth century; and had no further basis of affinity subsisted between it and our own Articles of Religion, it might fairly have demanded at our hands a more than passing notice. But there is a second and imperative reason . . . That Confession is most intimately connected with the progress of the English Reformation; and besides the influence which it cannot fail to have exerted by its rapid circulation in our country, it contributed directly, in a large degree, to the construction of the public Formularies of Faith put forward by the Church of England.<sup>8</sup>

Copies of the Confession and discussions of its theology circulated among English churchmen. For example, Cranmer's personal library included a copy of Joannes a Davantria, *Exegesis absolutissima . . . Evangelicae veritatis errorumque . . . quae sunt cum in Confessione Lutherana . . . turn in eiusdem Apologia*, Cologne, 1535, which included the text of the Augsburg Confession and its Apology.<sup>9</sup> In 1536 the Confession and Apology were translated into English as *The Confession of Faith of the Germans . . . translated by Richard Taverner at the Commandment of his Master . . . Thomas Cromwell Chief Secretary to the King's Grace*, London, 1536. Cromwell's name gave the translation an air of authority and it was published at a time when Henry VIII was seeking a political alliance with the German princes of the Schmalkaldic League. The discussions were as much theological as they were political.<sup>10</sup> Robert Barnes was sent to Wittenberg to come to some agreement with Luther and his colleagues. The result was the *Wittenberg Articles* of 1536, which self-consciously reflect the theological concerns of the Augsburg Confession.<sup>11</sup> The same year the *Ten Articles* were issued in London and the influence of the Augsburg Confession is to be detected here. The following year the so-called *Bishop's Book* was issued: *The Institution of a Christian Man*, London, 1537. Again, the influence of the Augsburg Confession is strong, particularly on the question of faith.<sup>12</sup> Early in 1538 German theologians came to London and a new attempt was made at a common confession of faith. Building on the Wittenberg Articles and the Augsburg Confession a new document was produced: the *Thirteen Articles* of 1538.<sup>13</sup>

Cranmer took the matter further in 1551 by drafting a number of articles of religion which, after some revision and discussion, were issued as the Forty-two Articles of 1553. These were later revised and modified by addition and subtraction, under the hand of Archbishop Matthew Parker, to be issued in their final form in 1571 as the Thirty-nine Articles. Many of these articles run parallel to those of the Augsburg Confession, indeed, the correspondence is sometimes verbatim (esp. Articles I-IV, IX, XI, XVI, XIX, XX, XXVI, XXXVII and XXXVIII). Other articles have phrases and expressions reflecting its influence as mediated

through the *Thirteen Articles*, 1536 (e.g. Articles XXV-XXVII, XXXIV) or the Württemberg Confession, 1551 (e.g. Articles V, VI, X, XI, XII, XX).

Thus the confessional principle of a statement which epitomizes the framework of faith within which a church lives and works, and enshrines the ethos of its teaching ministry, was accepted and practised by both Lutheranism and Anglicanism. Subscription to the confessional documents continued as an expression of unity of faith and practice within Lutheranism until about the mid-eighteenth century, when practically all semblances of the revealed faith were brushed aside by the advances of a trenchant rationalism. In Anglicanism the confessional principle, expressed in the form of subscription to the Thirty-nine Articles, continued to be upheld, as a necessary safeguard to the doctrine, life and witness of the church, well into the nineteenth century. But at a time when Anglicans were showing signs of dissatisfaction with their confession of faith, Lutherans were returning to a new understanding of their confessional documents. For example in Germany, Adolf von Harless wrote in 1827: 'After I had learned from the Scriptures what saving truth is, I turned to the Symbolical Books of my church. I cannot describe how surprised and how moved I was to discover that their content conformed with the convictions I had gained from the Scriptures and my experience of faith.'<sup>14</sup> Sometime around 1850 in America, Charles Porterfield Krauth was writing about the confessional principle within Lutheranism: 'Faith makes men Christians; but Confession alone marks them as Christians. The Rule of Faith is God's voice to us; faith is the hearing of that voice, and the Confession, our reply of assent to it. By our faith, we are known to the Lord as his; by our Confession, we are known to each other as his children . . . The subscription to a Confession is simply a just and easy mode of testifying to those who have a right to ask it of us, that we are what we claim and profess to be.'<sup>15</sup>

In England, however, a reverse trend had been set in motion by John Henry Newman. In Tract 90, *Remarks on Certain Passages in the Thirty-Nine Articles*, Oxford, 1840 (revised 1841), Newman called in question the accepted meaning of the Articles<sup>16</sup> and successfully undermined their significance for subsequent generations of Anglicans. W. R. Matthews wrote that 'the articles do not represent the present mind of the Church',<sup>17</sup> and David L. Edwards hoped 'that this burden on the consciences can finally be rolled away.'<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, the Thirty-nine Articles remain part of the Formularies of the Faith of the Church of England and every ordinand and new incumbent has to assent to them.<sup>19</sup> For many the exercise is entered into with some reluctance and once done is quickly forgotten.

For some non-evangelicals the problems are theological; they have moved away from orthodox Christian theology and do not want to be bound by it. For some evangelicals the problems are largely emotional; they wish to be free from the negative application of the Articles which they see as the hallmark of older evangelicalism. But both look on the Articles as stumbling-blocks to their aims and aspirations as twentieth-century Christians.

Much of the problem has been created by the way in which the Articles have been presented in the past. It has been suggested, not in so many words, perhaps, but by implication, that the Thirty-nine Articles contain all that is necessary to be believed by Anglican Christians. Some of our free church brethren speak of 'the negative implications of the Gospel'. Similarly, some Anglican evangelicals have been speaking about what amounts to 'the negative implications of the Articles'. The point of view is expressed that all that is necessary for Christian faith and witness in the present day is dealt with in the Articles, that all the issues of dogmatic theology were settled by this sixteenth-century document.

Two difficulties arise from such an approach. First, the Articles are given too prominent a place in matters of theological debate. Too often they have been given an *a priori* approach and application, with the result that the impression is given that the Scriptures are to be interpreted and understood in the light of the Articles. But this is a reversal of the purpose of the Articles: they do not form our understanding of Scripture, but Scripture, which formed their content, leads us to an understanding of the Articles. This is made clear in Article VI. ‘Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that what is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not required by any man, that it should be believed as an article of Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary.’<sup>20</sup> Second, a legalistic attitude toward the Articles often arises, suggesting that the act of assenting to the Articles is in itself the mark of one’s Christian profession. But this is to make faith into obedience and turn the gospel back into law. Article XVIII states clearly: ‘they also are to be accursed that presume to say, That every man shall be saved by the Law or Sect which he professteth, so that he be diligent to frame his life according to that Law . . . For holy Scripture doth set out unto us only the Name of Jesus Christ, whereby men must be saved.’ Subscription to the Articles does not make Christians; only the creation of faith in Christ by the Holy Spirit can do that.<sup>21</sup>

But the solution to the problem of mis-use is not non-use but re-use. In other words, the need is not to abandon the Articles but rather to recover the confessional principle which underlies them.

First, there is the need for such a statement of what we believe as Christians so that we can be distinguished by others from those who have other beliefs. These statements have not been compiled for the benefit of God but for the benefit of man and are part of our witness before each other and the world. Werner Elert writes: ‘Doctrine and confession are only meaningful as *externa* before men. God does not need them in order to judge us.’<sup>22</sup> There *is*, of course, a negative aspect to the Articles because restraints are needed if the church is to retain her specific Christian identity and local congregations have to be protected from fundamental errors of doctrine and life. But this negative aspect, important though it is, is but one among others. Second, the Articles, taken with the other Formularies of Faith in the Church of England, provide a framework for the teaching ministry. The recovery of the confessional principle implies a renewal of the teaching ministry in theological college and parish. The Articles are not intended simply as a proof of a new incumbent’s orthodoxy, or even as a witness to ‘historic Anglicanism’, but also as the guidelines within which the teaching function of the Church is to be exercised. Third, there is the need to recover the understanding that the Articles, like the Augsburg Confession, were not compiled as a new kind of canon law but as an expression of and witness to the gospel. The Reformation debate did not begin with the introduction of a new system of dogmatic theology. It began with the realization of the truth of the forgiveness and grace of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In coming to terms with the implications the gospel has for individual and corporate faith, life and work, and with the need to explain to others what it all adds up to, the Reformers were led to compile such confessions of faith as the Augsburg Confession and the Thirty-nine Articles.

In our generation we need to come to grips with the gospel and its implications for our belief and action, and we also need to learn how our forebears handled the matter and came to the confession of faith we now share with them. We may well have problems with the language in which the Articles are expressed, and some of the particular issues may seem more relevant to the sixteenth century than today, nevertheless their theological substance is just as necessary now as then.

We Anglicans need to appreciate from the Lutherans that we can learn again to live and work by our confession of faith, not as a theological restraint but as a positive expression of the gospel. We need the confessional framework that the Articles provide because we ‘must know the history of the past in order to live in the life of today, which is an outflowing of the life of yesterday, and in order to reach beyond the hour into that solemn tomorrow of the future, which is to be the outflowing of the life of today.’<sup>23</sup> Adopting the confessional stance of the Articles with enthusiasm means more than a facile repetition of what someone else said four hundred years ago. It means responding by faith to the message of the gospel, being committed to learning how to live by that gospel, and joining our voice with the witness of our forefathers so that present and future generations may stand with us and within the truth of historic Christianity.

**ROBIN A. LEAVER** is Associate Librarian, Latimer House, Oxford, and Minister in Charge of St Mary’s Cogges, Witney, Oxon.

Endnotes:

- 1) See for example, T. R. Jungkuntz, *Formulators of the Formula of Concord* (Concordia: St Louis 1977); R. Kolb, *Andreae and the Formula of Concord: Six sermons that paved the way to Lutheran Unity* (Concordia: St Louis 1977); *Discord, Dialogue and Concord: Studies in the Lutheran Reformation’s Formula of Concord*, edited by L. W. Spitz and W. Lohff (Fortress: Philadelphia 1977); *Widerspruch, Dialog und Einigung: Studien zum Konkordienwerk der Lutherischen Reformation*, ed. by L. W. Spitz and W. Lohff (Calwer : Stuttgart 1977).
- 2) Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Introduction, 4-5; *The Book of Concord. The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. and edited by T. G. Tappert (Fortress: Philadelphia 1959) p 502.
- 3) See the catalogue of exhibitions held in Speyer and Nürnberg: *450 Jahre Protestation zu Speyer 1529-1979. Ausstellung der Evangelischen Landeskirche der Pfalz . . . 23 April-30 September 1979 Heiligegeistkirche zu Speyer* (Zechner: Speyer 1979); *Reformation in Nürnberg-Umbruch und Bewahrung. Ausstellung im Germanischen Nationalmuseum 12 Juni bis 2 September 1979* (Medien & Kultur: Nürnberg 1979).
- 4) B. J. Kidd, *Documents Illustrative of the Continental Reformation* (Clarendon: Oxford 1911) p 245.
- 5) Modern critical edition: *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche. Herausgegeben im Gedenkjahr der Augsburgerischen Konfession 1930* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht: Göttingen 1963). English translations in general use: *Triglot Concordia. The Symbolical Books of the Ev. Lutheran Church, German-Latin-English, Published as a Memorial of the Quadricentenary Jubilee of the Reformation . . .* (Concordia: St. Louis 1921); *The Book of Concord* (see note 2).
- 6) The best work in English on this background remains J. M. Reu, *The Augsburg Confession. A Collection of Sources with an Historical Introduction* (Wartburg: Chicago 1930).
- 7) Augsburg Confession Art. I, Latin text: *The Book of Concord*, p 27. Melanchthon, however, thought of the document as his own property and brought out a substantially altered edition in 1540 in which important sections were entirely rewritten. The confusion of a double-standard contributed to the doctrinal controversies within Lutheranism after Luther’s death. The matter

was finally resolved with the acceptance of the *Formula of Concord* in 1577, which directed that the unaltered Augsburg Confession of 1530, the product of a theological consensus among the ‘evangelicals’, was to be preferred over the altered version produced by one theologian.

- 8) C. Hardwick, *A History of the Articles of Religion: to which is added a Series of Documents, from AD 1536 to AD 1615* (Bell: London 1890) p 13.
- 9) No. 162 in the forthcoming bibliography D. G. Selwyn and P. M. Black, *Cranmer’s Library*; Courtenay Studies in Reformation Theology.
- 10) For the background see N. S. Tjernagel, *Henry VIII and the Lutherans. A Study in Anglo-Lutheran Relations from 1521 to 1547* (Concordia: St Louis 1965); R. A. Leaver, *The Doctrine of Justification in the Church of England* (Latimer House: Oxford 1979) pp 4-14.
- 11) English text in Tjernagel, op. cit., pp 255-86, see also the analysis on p 162f.
- 12) B. Hall, ‘The Early Rise and Gradual Decline of Lutheranism in England (1520-1600)’, *Reform and Reformation: England and the Continent c.1500-c.1750*, ed. D. Baker (dedicated and presented to Professor Clifford W. Dugmore to mark his seventieth birthday), (Ecclesiastical History Society/Blackwell: Oxford 1979) p 117.
- 13) The Latin text is given in Hardwick, op. cit., pp 259-76; and an English translation in Tjernagel, op. cit., pp 287-306.
- 14) Quoted in H. Sasse, *Here We Stand. Nature and Character of Lutheran Faith*, tr. T. G. Tappert (Augsburg: Minneapolis 1946) p 171f. ‘In our faith we stood squarely on these documents [the Lutheran Confessional writings] because we embraced the article of justification. So we were Lutherans even before we knew it . . . We read the confessions of the church as testimonies of sound teaching in order to clarify and support our knowledge of salvation. Their symbolical significance bothered us little. But as soon as we began to inquire about the path along which God had led us, about the testimonies out of which our faith had arisen, and about the historical roots, in the church’s past, of our present condition, we became conscious of occupying a place in the very midst of Lutheranism’, Gottfried Thomasius, *Das Wiederwachen des evangelischen Lebens in der lutherischen Kirche Bayerns, 1800-1840*, Erlangen, 1867, quoted by T. G. Tappert, ed., *Lutheran Confessional Theology in America 1840-1880* (Oxford University Press: New York 1972) p 9f.
- 15) C. P. Krauth, *The Conservative Reformation and Its Theology* (General Council Publications Board 1871) pp 166 & 171. For other writings of this American Confessional Lutheranism, see the essays collected in *Lutheran Confessional Theology in America* (details given in note 14).
- 16) ‘Owing to the limitations of the scholarship of his time regarding the issues and terminology of Reformation debate, he [Newman] thought the Articles were more ambiguous than they really were, and failed to see that the “real and catholic sense” which he read into them was at many points inconsistent with the sense which an historically better informed interpreter would read out of them’, *Subscription and Assent to the Thirty-Nine Articles. A Report of the Archbishops’ Commission on Christian Doctrine* (SPCK: London 1968) p 14.
- 17) Quoted in *Subscription and Assent*, p 29.
- 18) *ibid.*

- 19) Formerly ordinands and new incumbents had to formally assent to the Articles themselves (together with the Prayer Book), but since 1975 such assent is given to the Scriptures, the three Creeds, the Thirty-nine Articles, and the 1662 Prayer Book, which contains the Creeds and the Catechism. This now approximates more closely Lutheran subscription to their Confessional writings, which include the three Creeds, Augsburg Confession, Luther's Catechisms, etc.
- 20) 'We believe, teach, and confess that the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments are the only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and teachers alike must be appraised and judged . . . Other writings of ancient and modern teachers, whatever their names, should not be put on a par with Holy Scripture. Every single one of them should be subordinated to the Scriptures', Formula of Concord, Epitome, Introduction, 1-2; *The Book of Concord*, p 464f.
- 21) 'True doctrine and pure confession are, at best, fruits of faith. They are not faith itself. They cannot justify us before God any more than good works can establish the confessor as a true child of God.' W. Elert, *The Christian Ethos*, trans. C. J. Schindler (Fortress: Philadelphia 1957) p 355.
- 22) *ibid.*
- 23) Krauth, *op. cit.* p 176.