

Some Important Lutheran Documents of the Reformation:

An Overview

The Ninety Five Theses

Martin Luther sent a letter dated Oct. 31, 1517 to his Archbishop Albert of Mainz and attached his 95 Theses or propositions calling for a public debate on the practice of granting and selling indulgences and other forms of corruption in the church.



An indulgence (letter of forgiveness) took the place of some other kind of penance to reduce the punishment required as a result of sins that had been committed. The belief was that after death, because of numerous sins, the soul did not go straight to heaven but to purgatory, an intermediate place, where satisfaction had to be made for all sins committed before being allowed into heaven.

The slogan was, “When a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs.”

Martin Luther stated in the 95 Theses, “Any truly repentant Christian has a right to full remission of penalty and guilt, even without indulgence letters...and this is granted by God...”

Luther also delivered a copy of the 95 Theses to the Wittenberg printer who had his printing press in the basement of the building. Whether Luther actually nailed the 95 Thesis to the cathedral door is debated but what is known is that within two weeks, copies of the theses had spread throughout Germany; within two months, they had spread throughout Europe.

Reformation writings

Martin Luther and other reformers wrote and published numerous documents including sermons, commentaries, pamphlets, hymns and books. The full collection of Luther’s writings fills more than 60 volumes.

Martin Luther was the first person to translate and publish the Bible in the commonly-spoken dialect of the German people. The Luther German New Testament translation was first published in September of 1522. The translation of the Old Testament followed, yielding an entire German language Bible in 1534.

The Book of Concord

The Book of Concord was published in 1580 as a collection of important and selected writings representing the official and collective voice and heritage of the Lutheran churches. (Note: The 95 Theses, Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation 1518 and many other important essays by Luther and others are not included in The Book of Concord.)

The Book of Concord contains the three chief symbols or ecumenical creeds of the Christian faith: The Apostles’ (c. 3rd century), the Nicene (AD 325) and the Athanasian creeds (c. 5th century), The Augsburg Confession (1530), Apology of the Augsburg Confession (1531), The Smalcald Articles (1537), Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope (1537), The Small Catechism (1529), The Large Catechism (1529) and the Formula of Concord (1577)

The Augsburg Confession (1530)

The Augsburg Confession was presented by a number of German rulers and free-cities at the Diet of Augsburg on 25 June 1530 to the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. Written by Philip Melancthon with the help of Luther and others The Augsburg Confession consists of 28 articles presented by Lutheran princes and representatives of "free cities" at the Diet of Augsburg that set forward what the Lutherans believed, taught and confessed in positive (theses) and negative (antitheses) statements. The theses are 21 Chief Articles of Faith describing the normative principles of Christian faith held by the Lutherans; the antitheses are seven statements describing what they viewed as abuses of the Christian faith present in the Roman church.

The first ten articles are summarized below as examples:

Article I: God – We hold and teach in accordance with the Nicene Creed one divine essence which is God and that there are three person in this one divine essence: God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit and reject other interpretations regarding the nature of God.

Article II: Original Sin – It is also taught among us that since the fall of Adam all people are born in sin and unable by nature to have true fear of God and true faith in God.

Article III: The Son of God - It is also taught among us that God the Son became man, born of the virgin Mary and that the two natures, divine and human are inseparably united in one person that there is one Christ, true God and true man as stated in the Apostles' Creed.

Article IV: Justification By Faith - It is also taught among us that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits or works but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith... (This is often described as the one article by which the "church stands or falls".)

Article V: The Office of the Ministry – To obtain such faith God instituted the office of the ministry, that is, provided the Gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith, when and where he pleases in those who hear the Gospel...

Article VI: Of The New Obedience - It is also taught among us that such faith should produce good fruits and good works...

Article VII: The Church – It is also taught among us that one holy Christian church will be and remain forever. This is the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments administered according to the Gospel.

Article VIII: What The Church Is - Despite what hypocrisy may exist in the church (and among people), the Word and the Sacraments are always valid because they are instituted by Christ, no matter what the sins may be of the one who administers them.

Article IX: Baptism – Our churches teach that Baptism is necessary for salvation, that the grace of God is offered through Baptism and that children should be baptized, for being offered to God through Baptism they are received into his grace.

Article X: The Lord's Supper – Our churches teach that the body and blood of Christ are truly present in the Supper of our Lord under the form of bread and wine and are there distributed and received.

Apology of the Augsburg Confession (1531)

The Apology (or Defense) of the Augsburg Confession was written by Philip Melancthon after the 1530 Diet of Augsburg as a response to the Roman Catholic *Confutation* which was its repudiation of the Lutheran confession. It was signed as a confession of faith by leading members of the Smalcald League (Princes and free cities who supported the Lutheran reformers) in February, 1537 and included in the Book of Concord in 1580. As the longest document in the Book of Concord it offers the most detailed Lutheran response to the Roman Catholicism of that day as well as an extensive Lutheran exposition of the doctrine of Justification.

The Smalcald Articles (1537)

The Smalcald Articles were written by Martin Luther in 1537 as a summary of the Lutheran position on Christian doctrine to be presented at a council called by Pope Paul III to stop the Protestant heresies. The council was postponed until 1545 and eventually held in Trent without any Lutherans present. Concerning Article 1 on "Christ and Faith" Luther wrote: "Faith alone justifies us" Romans 3:26 and "Nothing in this article can be given up or compromised...On this article rests all that we teach and practice against the pope, the devil and the world."

Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope (1537)

In preparation for the council called by Pope Paul III in 1537 (but which was postponed to 1545 as the Council of Trent) Philip Melancthon was asked by the members of the Smalcald League to write a document to supplement the Augsburg Confession on the matter of the pope and his power.

The document makes three main points: 1) the pope is not head of the Christian Church and superior to all other bishops by divine right (*de iure divino*), 2) the pope and bishops do not hold civil authority by divine right, 3) the claim of the *Bull Unam sanctam* (1302) that obedience to the pope is necessary for salvation is invalid since it contradicts the doctrine of justification by faith.

The Small Catechism (1529) and The Large Catechism (1529)

Luther's Small Catechism was published in 1529 for use by parents in the home for the training of their children in the Christian faith and contains the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, and the Sacrament of Holy Communion and the Office of the Keys and Confession. It is included in the Book of Concord as an authoritative statement of what Lutherans believe. The Small Catechism is widely used today in Lutheran churches in Christian education and Confirmation.

Luther's Large Catechism was also published in 1529 particularly to aid parish pastors and adults in teaching their congregations and contains The Ten Commandments, The Apostles' Creed, The Lord's Prayer, Holy Baptism, The Sacrament of the Altar and Confession. It was included in the Book of Concord in 1580.

Luther purposely arranged the sections and explanations of the Catechism moving from the law to the creed, Lord's prayer and sacraments to emphasize the relationship between Law and Gospel. The question and answer formulations also promote thinking and dialogue in contrast to mindless rote memorization.

Luther set the example when he wrote: "As for myself, let me say that I too am a doctor and preacher – Yet I do as a child who is being taught the catechism. Every morning and whenever else I have time, I read and recite word for word the Lord's prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Psalms (Luther knew all 150 by heart) etc. I must still read and study the Catechism daily, yet I

cannot master it as I wish, but must remain a child and pupil of the Catechism and I do it gladly.”
(Book of Concord, 1959: 359)

Formula of Concord (1577)

After Luther’s death in 1546 and the military defeat of Lutheran princes and estates by Catholic forces a series of controversies broke out and Lutherans split into two groups that supported the teachings of Luther and Melancthon respectively. Several conferences were held to heal the rift and the Formula of Concord was compiled over a three year period and signed in 1577 by some 8000 theologians and pastors. The Epitome is a brief and concise presentation of the Formula's twelve articles; the Solid Declaration is a detailed exposition.

Some other important documents not included in the Book of Concord

The Heidelberg Disputation (1518)

In 1518 Luther was asked to defend his “new theology” at a gathering of his Augustinian order in Heidelberg. The Heidelberg Disputation is considered by some to be more important and relevant today theologically than the 95 Theses.

The whole disputation moves from the question of the law of God to the love of God through the cross. Luther makes his argument that salvation is by grace alone and not by works. He compares a theologian of glory, who wants to do something to earn or receive grace, and a theologian of the cross who despairs of our own ability and knows there is nothing that we can do except to wait upon God’s grace.

The Address to the German Nobility (1520)

In this work for the first time Luther defined the doctrines of the priesthood of all believers and the two kingdoms. The work was written in the vernacular language German and not in Latin. It was the first publication Luther produced after he was convinced that a break with Rome was both inevitable and unavoidable. In it he attacked what he regarded as the "three walls" of the Catholic church that: secular authority had no jurisdiction over them; that only the pope is able to explain Scripture; that nobody but the Pope himself can call a general church council.

This letter broke down the barrier between the spiritual and the temporal sphere and had a large impact on the laity, giving them control over their own faith and diminishing the control from the pope and the church.

The Babylonian Captivity (1520)

In this work Luther examined the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church in the light of his interpretation of the Bible and declared that Baptism and Holy Communion were the only two sacraments instituted by Christ himself. He advocated giving the cup as well as the bread to the laity based on Scripture. He dismissed the Catholic doctrine of Transubstantiation (which held that the wine and bread were changed into the real blood and body of Christ) and instead affirmed the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist based on Jesus’ words of institution “This is my body given to you” and “This is my blood shed for you.” Luther also rejected the teaching that the Mass was a sacrifice offered to God.

On the Freedom of a Christian (1520)

In the document entitled On the Freedom of a Christian, sometimes also called "A Treatise on Christian Liberty" Luther developed the concept that as fully forgiven children of God, Christians are no longer compelled to keep God's law; however, they freely and willingly serve God and their

neighbors. Luther also further developed the concept of justification by faith. In the treatise, Luther stated, "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."

The function of the Lutheran Confessions today

It is important to understand that the various confessional documents were born as a result of certain controversies in a particular context. Luther did not intend to start a new church but only wanted to reform the Catholic church to which he belonged. The Confessions point beyond themselves to the Scriptures, to their center which is the Gospel of Jesus Christ and justification by grace through faith and not by works.

For Lutherans it is the Scriptures not the Confessions which are held up as the only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and practices are judged. However the Confessions are accepted as true witnesses, pointers, treasures and anchors in a living tradition of the church that is always reforming "*semper reformanda*" (Anderson, 1977:26).

For centuries the official relationship between the Catholic church and Lutherans was strained. However on October 31, 1999 after years of dialogue representatives of the Lutheran World Federation and Roman Catholic Church formally accepted the **Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification** in Augsburg, Germany. Both sides retracted the condemnations made against each other in previous centuries and agreed that the core of the Biblical message is that salvation is by God's grace and not by human efforts.

As in Luther's time the church today also has to decide in every concrete situation what sort of struggle(s) it is facing and how to respond faithfully. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's two-fold criterion for a *status confessionis* where the state interferes with the church's mandate and where the state fails to fulfill its task to ensure peace and justice is still relevant. For example in 1977 the LWF Assembly declared its rejection of the racist system of apartheid in South Africa as a *status confessionis*, a matter of faith.

What are the concrete challenges we are facing today locally and globally? How will the church participate in God's mission of transformation, reconciliation and empowerment that all might have life in its fullness?

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