

# THE FORMULA OF CONCORD

## A SURVEY OF ITS HISTORY

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One of the many blessed fruits of the Reformation was the revival of the interest in and necessity of Confessions. It had been dead for centuries. In 1530, in the days of Luther, the Augsburg Confession was presented at the Diet of Augsburg. It was an objective presentation of the Christian faith centering around justification by faith alone. It still is the outstanding Confession of the Lutheran Church. Melanchthon sought to alter it in order to bring it in greater conformity with the Church of Rome and the Reformed doctrine. His altered confession is known as the Variata of 1540. Pope Paul III sought to extirpate the Lutheran heresy. To counter his endeavor, the Lutherans met at Schmalkalden in 1534 to formulate their own creed and to form a defensive league. The Smalcald Articles are the work of Luther in the main, especially his statement on the system of the Papacy as being the Antichrist. The Romanists were quick to point out the differences between the statements of the conservative Lutherans and those of Melanchthon. After the death of Luther in 1546, the confessional storm broke over the Lutheran Church. Practically all of southern Germany was regained by the Church of Rome and the Emperor Charles V. Transubstantiation and the Seven Sacraments were widely accepted within Protestant circles, also in sections of northern Germany. Melanchthon favored the concessions to Rome and the Reformed. In the Leipzig Interim of 1548, two years after Luther's death, the compromise of justification by faith and works was agreed upon. The clergy was pledged to obey the pope and the Seven Sacraments were reintroduced. Because of Melanchthon's compromises, much dissension arose within Lutheran circles. Flacius, a young professor at the University of Wittenberg became one of the main opponents of Melanchthon. The followers of Melanchthon were known as Philippists.

In 1567, Jacob Andreae was asked to draw up a confession which should establish peace within the Lutheran camp. He formulated articles of faith. They were revised in Bergen by Martin Chemnitz. This confession became known as the Solid Declaration. Andreae added an Epitome to it. Both were embodied in the Book of Concord. In the Epitome, Andreae also presents the state of the controversy, both the affirmed doctrine and the rejected heresy. It was signed by three electors, sixteen princes, thirty-eight cities and eight thousand clergymen. While the Augsburg Confession is the objective presentation of Christian doctrine, the Formula of Concord deals with the subsequent controversies. The signatures to the Formula of Concord were given in 1577. Andreae also wrote a Preface to the Formula of Concord. In 1580, all the of the Confessions of the Lutheran Church—the three ecumenical creeds, the Apostolic, Nicene and Athanasian Creeds; the unaltered Augsburg Confession and its Apology; Luther's Large and Small Catechism; the Smalcald Articles and the Formula of Concord, were published in the Book of Concord. It appeared in print on June 25, 1580, just fifty years after the presentation of the Augsburg Confession in 1530. It was a German edition. A Latin edition appeared four years later in 1584. Herewith we have presented an epitome of the history leading up to the Formula of Concord since the days of Augsburg. Now we should like to present, in somewhat greater detail, some of the events and controversies that led up to the Formula of Concord and also sketch some of the forerunners and leading characters of this controversial period.

Among the leading men in Luther's days, we should like to mention John Brenz, who met Luther in Heidelberg in 1518 and became his ardent follower. He labored primarily Schwaben, defending the truth against princes and paupers alike. He came to the defense of Luther, when Oecolampadius attacked the Reformer because of his teachings on the Lord's Supper. He was also present at the colloquy in Marburg in 1529 between Luther and Zwingli. In 1530, he timidly sided with Melanchthon and was ready to acknowledge papal supremacy. He was severely criticized for it. Later on he became the reformer of Württemberg and its University in Tübingen. When he fully recognized the inability to harmonize Christ and the devil, Luther and

the Pope, he determined to bring about reforms in Württemberg. He was very practical, blunt and to the point, and could not be bribed.

Johannes Bugenhagen was another ardent follower of Luther and champion of the truth. He was born on the Island of Wollin in 1485. He was a very talented and studious man, and became rector of the Gymnasium at Treptow. In 1520, he read Luther's Treatise on the Babylonian Captivity of the Church and exclaimed: "The whole world is in blindness and great darkness. This is the only man that sees the truth." He came to Wittenberg, delivered lectures on the Psalms and became pastor of the City Church. He helped Luther in the translation of the Bible, stayed with him during the pestilence. He revealed a great talent for the organizing of churches especially in Braunsschweig, Hamburg, Lübeck and then also in Denmark. He was made superintendent of the Province of Saxony. The death of Luther almost broke his heart, and he aged rapidly after the Reformer's decease. During the siege of Wittenberg by the troops of Alba and Charles V, he was told that the Emperor would persecute him. He refused to leave the city nevertheless. After the surrender of the city, Bugenhagen preached without fear on the differences in doctrine between the Lutherans and the Romanists. Many courtiers listened to him. His motto was: "If you know Christ well, it is sufficient, if you do not know Christ, it is nothing, even though you have learned and know everything." He was known as the Doctor Pomeranus. Both he and Brenz were staunch defenders of the truth, while Melanchthon became evermore a man of compromise for the sake of peace, both with Rome and the Reformed Church. His Altered Augsburg Confession of 1540, the so-called Variata reveals the compromising character of this otherwise so learned Melanchthon, who was known as the Praeceptor or Teacher of Germany.

Among the foremost leaders of the cause of Lutheranism after the death of the Reformer, we should like to mention Jacob Andreae and Martin Chemnitz. Jacob Andreae was born in Württemberg in 1528. He became pastor of a church in Stuttgart, but was deposed because he refused to bow to the Leipzig Interim of 1548. In the Leipzig Interim, it was Melanchthon, who yielded compromising, justification by faith alone by adding good works, also pledging the clergy to obey the Pope and reintroducing confirmation and extreme unction as sacraments, also the carrying of the host on the day of Corpus Christi. Andreae opposed Melanchthon, became superintendent and chancellor of the University of Tübingen in Württemberg. He virtually became the heir of the work Brenz had done before him. At first Andreae tried to pacify the contending factions within the Lutheran Church. For this mediating role he was maligned by the Philippists, the followers Melanchthon, for his learning too much toward conservative Lutheranism and also by the strict Lutherans for his defense of the Philippists as not being Calvinists. Andreae's efforts to pacify were crowned with success and were culminated by the formulation of the Formula of Concord and its adoption. He was a courageous defender of the truth, but lacked the theological insight of Martin Chemnitz, who surpassed him by far in acumen and consistency. By the way, Valentin Andreae of the FAL in our country is a descendent of Jacob Andreae.

Martin Chemnitz, the other great protagonist of the truth was born in the Province of Mecklenburg in 1522. He studied in Wittenberg and was thrilled to hear the great teacher and preacher Martin Luther both at his lectures at the University and in the City Church. In 1546, he came to Wittenberg as professor and began to lecture on Melanchthon's Loci Communes before large audiences of students and also professors. Even Melanchthon, the author of the Loci, came to hear his lectures. In 1554, he became pastor and superintendent in Braunschweig. He died in 1586, several years after the publishing of the Book of Concord. He was a prince among the Lutheran theologians and next to Luther the greatest theologian of the Lutheran Church. His monumental work was his Examination of the Councils of Trent, convened by Pope Paul III 1545-1563. He directed his Examination in the main against Bellarmin, a Jesuit theologian, who presented and defended the Roman Catholic doctrines at the Council of Trent. Recently the Chemnitz' examen has been translated into the English idiom by Dr. John Preuss, the president of the Missouri Synod. Chemnitz also wrote a Harmony of the Four Gospels. Illness prevented him from completing it. It was completed by John Gerhard, who also attacked the Jesuitic teaching of Bellarmin. Our Lutheran Church owes its Formula of Concord, in the main, as well as the unification of the sorely torn asunder Lutheran Church to Andreae and Chemnitz. Chemnitz revised the doctrines as recorded by Andreae. He is distinguished for his clarity of expression and scriptural correctness.

Besides the main luminaries and authors of the Formula of Concord Andreae and Chemnitz, we shall have to mention other contestants either for or against the truth such as Flacius and Amsdorf on the one side and Major and Osiander on the other side. As we meet them in the doctrinal controversies, we shall add the necessary biographical notes. Foremost among them was Flacius, also known as Illyricus from the land of Illyrium, the land in which he was born in 1520. He wanted to study theology. His attention was called to Luther at Wittenberg, as the one who had restored the pure Gospel. He studied at Wittenberg and found peace in the knowledge of justification by faith alone and then dedicated his whole life to the defense of this cardinal doctrine. He begged Melanchthon on bended knee not to give in to the Leipzig Interim. Melanchthon refused and saw in Flacius only one who was stirring up hatred against him. Flacius now began to attack him in his writings. Forced to leave Wittenberg, he went to Magdeburg, from where he continued the defense of the truth against the many adversaries.

Melanchthon wanted to classify some of the divergent doctrines of the Romanists and the Reformed as adiaphora, indifferent or middle things, in which one may yield for the sake of peace. Flacius claimed that at times even middle things can cease to be such and must be dropped such as immersion in baptism over against sprinkling. Melanchthon refused to go along. The Adiaphoristic Controversy had been brought on by the Augsburg Interim of 1548. Emperor Charles V had been victorious in the battle of Mühlenberg, in which he crushed the Smalcald League and made the Elector John Fredrick his captive. Charles V was now willing to concede the cup in the Lord's Supper to the laity and the marriage of the clergy, but he insisted on the observance of the Seven Sacraments and obedience to the Pope. Melanchthon and his and his followers were willing to concede this. They viewed them as adiaphora. Flacius and Brenz opposed violently claiming that it is wrong to observe even indifferent matters, if a false impression is conveyed and offense is given. Soon George Major, superintendent of the Church at Eisleben, also said that good works are necessary for salvation. Flacius opposed him and above all Amsdorf. The latter had been one of the first students of Wittenberg and a fervent admirer of Luther. Unfortunately he went too far, when he stated: "Good works are harmful to salvation." Now Flacius also had to attack him. Major had been willing to drop his statement because of its ambiguity, but he was not willing to concede that it was wrong. The controversy was settled in Article IV of the Formula of Concord. In this Article, faith is compared with the root of a tree and good works with the fruit.

Another controversy that had to be settled was the one on the necessity of good works for salvation. George Major had said that good works are necessary for salvation. Now there were also those, who claimed that man can cooperate with grace in conversion. It is known as the Synergistic Controversy. Both Majorism and Synergism are aimed against the Sola Gratia. The true opposite of synergism is not Calvinism with its doctrine of a double election into salvation and damnation, of irresistible grace and a denial of universal redemption, but rather the monergism of grace alone, which states that through the Fall of Adam, man is spiritually dead and utterly unable to contribute anything toward his justification and conversion and is the enemy of God. God alone is the author of conversion, perseverance in faith and final salvation. That faith alone justifies was Luther's tenet, based on the Scriptures. Of justification, Luther said: "This is my dogma!" At first Melanchthon was in agreement with Luther and he expressed it Article XVIII and XIX of the Augsburg Confession. Later on he leaned more toward Erasmus and his Diatribe on Free Will. When Luther became aware of it, he said; "This is the theology of Erasmus!" Melanchthon now began to ascribe to man the ability to be for and against the will of God. Such tenets he revealed in his *Confessio Augustana Variata* of 1540. Melanchthon became the father of synergism. At first he kept his thoughts under cover. In vain did he try to solve the question why some are saved and others are not. A heated controversy arose. The Philippists came out in the defense of Melanchthon, while the opponents, foremost among them Flacius and Amsdorf, were not always careful and shot beyond the mark with their statements. In general they frankly sided with Luther and his stand taken in *De Servo Arbitrio*. They took a firm stand against all forms of synergism. Man, they said, is wholly passive in his conversion. Even after conversion, all the good that man does is the work of the Holy Ghost from the very beginning till the very end.

In the controversy on the Free Will, Flacius also made a statement that could not be upheld. He had claimed that original sin belongs to the substance of man and is not an accident, something that has befallen

him. This controversy was settled in the First Article of the Formula of Concord, in which the Flacian error was rejected. “It is unchristian to say that original sin is baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity, sanctified and saved. While original sin is an accident, something that has befallen man, it is nevertheless total corruption. Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism was also rejected. Nothing good remains in man. In God’s sight man is spiritually dead (*plane est mortuus*). In one of our hymns we sing: “Through Adam’s Fall is all corrupt, nature and essence human.” It was composed by Lazarus Spengler, a contemporary of Luther.

Another controversy that had to be settled was the Osiandrian. Luther had expressed the fear that the doctrine of justification would be obscured after his death. Andrew Osiander became guilty of it. He had introduced the Reformation in Nürnberg, had sided with Luther against Zwingli, had opposed the concessions and compromises of Melanchthon and acknowledged with Luther the Papacy as being the Antichrist. Concerning justification, Osiander taught that God does not declare the sinner just, but makes him just by letting Christ dwell in him. Christ does not act as a judge, but as a physician. This was a Romanizing error and was opposed by both Melanchthon and Chemnitz. He also claimed that Christ is our righteousness only according to His divine nature. The Italian Stancarò went to the opposite extreme saying that Christ is our righteousness only according to His human nature. In Article III of the Formula of Concord, these errors were corrected. Christ is our righteousness according to both natures. The errors were rejected as a finer and more veiled Romanism.

Another controversy that was settled was the Antinomian. Agricola, pastor at Eisleben, then professor in Wittenberg, then court preacher in Brandenburg, maintained that the Law had no place in the Church. Knowledge of sin and contrition are wrought by the Gospel. Luther had brought Agricola to Wittenberg, but now he was forced to stop him from spreading errors. Agricola claimed: Repentance and conversion can only be achieved through evangelical preaching. The Philippists had taken the same stand following Melanchthon. The controversy was settled, in the Formula of Concord, which speaks of a three-fold use of the Law. It serves as a mirror (*Spiegel*), showing us our sin and the need of a Savior. It also serves as a curb (*Riegel*), preventing the coarse outbreak of sin and helps to preserve order and decency in this world. It also serves as a rule (*Regel*), guiding us that we willingly do according to God’s commandments, It also serves as a rule for the regenerate, who still deed the Law because of their Old Adam, Law and Gospel are thus clearly distinguished and also justification and sanctification.

Christ’s Descent into Hell had also become a controversial issue. Luther taught that Christ descended into hell to show his victory over the Devil, not to atone for man in suffering the tortures of hell. This He had done on the Cross and expressed it with His: “My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?” Aepinus, a student of Luther and later pastor in Hamburg, had taught that Christ descended into hell to suffer its tortures and to atone for our sins. He did this while the body was lying in the grave. For him it was the last step of Christ’s humiliation. In Article IX of the Formula of Concord, this false doctrine was dealt with.

The biblical teaching or Predestination is set forth in Article XI of the Formula of Concord. This doctrine was not in controversy but not all used the same phraseology. It was deemed wise to insert the correct teaching. There was dissension, however, on this doctrine in the ranks of the Reformed. Not all accepted the horrible and crude double election of Calvin unto salvation and damnation and irresistible grace. Others tried to explain it by a different conduct of man, by a greater and lesser resistance etc. The Lutheran Church upholds the teaching that God has elected those who shall be saved, but also teaches universal grace. God did not predestinate unto damnation. The Gospel is offered to all mankind. If any are lost, it is their own fault. The Calvinists are separated into two distinct camps. The Supralapsarians claim that God has created some unto salvation and others unto damnation. The Infralapsarians say: God has permitted man to fall. The Arminians claim that the decree of redemption precedes the decree of election. God foresaw the call of the individual, who possessed free will and the power to accept or reject grace. The Formula of Concord upholds the *sola gratia* and *gratia universalis*, making grace the only cause of man’s salvation and the evil will of man the sole cause of his damnation. This election is one of grace and only extends over the children of God, not over the wicked. The vessels of grace and mercy are prepared by God alone, those of damnation by man alone. Article II of the Formula of Concord deals with Original Sin and Free Will. There is no conflict between Articles II and XI.

Grace is the sole cause of salvation and is intended for all. It remains a mystery, which we cannot explain, one which we accept. Only heaven will solve the mystery for us: *cur alii prae aliis*. Luther had expressed himself on Predestination also in his *De Servo Arbitrio*. Since the Lutherans wanted a clear statement on Predestination, Article XI was formulated. The Formula of Concord merely confirms its agreement with the scriptural teaching of Luther on this subject. Other heresies were also dealt with such as the Anabaptists and the Antitrinitarians (Socinus), Schwenkfeldt and others. The Lutheran Church sought a clear and scriptural symbolical statement over against all of the heresies that troubled the Church after the days of Luther. Its aim was to retain the precious heritage of the Reformation for later generations. In this light, we must view the Formula of Concord above all.

A zeal for purity and unity in doctrine and practice can surely be ascribed to the Lutherans of the 16<sup>th</sup> century after the death of the Reformer. Flacius and Amsdorf made several overtures of peace to Melanchthon; but he felt that they were merely criticizing and even slandering him, when they could not and would not follow him in his compromising the truth of the Gospel. In his Altered Augsburg Confession of 1540, Melanchthon revealed his inner stand and self. The Philippists followed him, but the conservative Lutherans refused to go along. In 1567, Andreae was asked to draw up a formula for peace within the Lutheran Church. He formulated Eleven Articles. They were revised by Chemnitz. In 1576, a meeting was held at Torgau, at which Andreae, Chemnitz, Selnecker, and Chytraeus were present. Chytraeus was a pupil of Luther and later on professor at Rostock in Mecklenburg. He was a pillar of faith in Rostock and was also viewed as one of the last Fathers of the Lutheran Church. He was also called the theological oracle of his time. These men formulated the Torgau Book of Faith of 1576. The final formulation was made at Kloster Bergen near Magdeburg. It is really the Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord, of which Andreae is the author. To this he added an Epitome. Martin Chemnitz gave both the finishing touch with his revision. Both the Solid Declaration and the Epitome were ready for publication and acceptance in 1577. The Solid Declaration offers an objective presentation of the Christian doctrine, the Epitome adds the state of controversy in the respective doctrines, affirming the truth and rejecting the false teaching. The Scriptures were set down as the only rule of doctrine and practice.

The first ones to sign the Formula of Concord were the theologians Andreae, Chemnitz, Selnecker and Chytraeus. They signed with the following declaration and pledge: “Since now in the sight of God and of all Christendom, we wish to testify to those now living and those who shall come after us that this declaration herewith presented concerning all the controverted articles aforementioned and explained and no other is our faith, doctrine and confession, in which we are also willing by God’s grace, to appear with intrepid hearts before the judgment seat of Jesus Christ and give account of it and that we will neither privately nor publicly speak or write anything contrary to it, but by the help of God’s grace intend to abide thereby: therefore after mature deliberation we have in God’s fear and with the invocation of His name attached our signatures with our own hands.”

The Formula of Concord was not only signed by these outstanding Lutheran theologians and pillars of the Lutheran faith, but also by three electors, sixteen bishops, thirty-five cities and eight thousand clergymen. The territories that were overwhelmingly Calvinistic, such as the Pfalz and Heidelberg, did not accept the Formula of Concord. In Sweden and Denmark, Frederick issued an edict forbidding the publication of the Formula of Concord in his realm. His sister, the wife of the Elector of Saxony sent him a copy of the Formula, which he promptly cast into the fire.

The Formula of Concord is not a new confession in the strict sense of the word. Its object was to explain the old symbols of the Lutheran Church. Whoever accepts the other symbols fully including the Augsburg Confession, will also accept the Formula of Concord. Its framers made it unmistakably clear that they did not wish to depart a finger’s breadth from the old Confessions and especially not from the Augsburg Confession. The Formula of Concord is a true reaffirmation of true Lutheranism. Luther was regarded by the authors of this Confession as the God-given Reformer and Teacher of the Lutheran Church, for them he also was the highest authority, not Melanchthon. They wanted to vindicate and restore the teachings of Luther, whom they accepted as a faithful interpreter of Scriptures. Some have tried to claim that the Formula of Concord is a compromise between Luther and Melanchthon. It is not. The Formula of Concord gave the victory to Luther and not to

Melanchthon and the errorists. It was the aim of the writers of the Formula of Concord to establish peace and unity within the Lutheran Church, but never by compromising the truth of the Bible and Luther's doctrine. The Bible, for them, was the sole rule of faith and Luther was viewed as its greatest expounder and interpreter. They also stated emphatically that their teachings were in full harmony with the Bible and the Augsburg Confession.

It has been asserted that the Formula of Concord has harmed the cause of Lutheranism, driving many into the Calvinistic camp. Such views expressed by avowed unionists, who are indifferent to purity of doctrine, who seek large numbers in their fold rather than a doctrine, for whom quantity is more important than quality. In truth it is error that causes dissension and separation, while the divine truth is a unifying power, yet never at the expense of the truth. Many controversies within the Lutheran Church were settled by the Formula of Concord. It did not drive the Lutherans into the Calvinistic camp, but rather separated the true Lutherans from the masked Calvinists or Crypto-Calvinists. By stating the truth both in thesis and antithesis, the pure doctrine was brought out very clearly and no one could hide behind the formal word as do so many also in our day, when they purport to teach, defend and uphold the truth, while in reality they have departed from it. Whatever the Lutheran Church lost in numbers, it gained in unity and firmness. A union between the Lutheran and the Reformed Church as it was envisioned by the Philippists was indeed foiled. If ever a union between these two churches could take place, it could only be by a fall acceptance of the Formula of Concord. Only thus could a God-pleasing unity be effected. Everything else would be a compromise of the truth.

It has been and still is being claimed by many Lutherans that no additional Lutheran Confession was necessary after the Augsburg Confession. The Lutheran Church, however, was in danger of drifting apart. Many errorists rejected the old doctrines. If purity of doctrine was to be preserved, it could not be transformed into a body aligned with unionistic and Reformed church bodies, who are all of a different spirit as Luther had already told Zwingli. The Formula of Concord not only separated the Lutheran Church from the Romanists, but also from the Zwinglians and Crypto-Calvinists. Many Lutherans in our day are willing to subscribe to the Augsburg Confession, yet with their own mental reservations about some of its doctrines. They reject the Formula of Concord as being too extreme, demanding and exclusive. Unionists and errorists to this day reject the Formula of Concord.

The doctrinal content of the Formula of Concord is the unadulterated, infallible Word of God and cannot be refuted. The statement of controversy irritates and angers the assailant. All doctrinal statements of our day ought to express the state of controversy very clearly, so that the errorists cannot hide behind the wording, claim that they are orthodox, while in reality they interpret the wording to suit themselves. If our Lutheran Church is to preserve pure doctrine, it will have to be guided by the principles of the men that formulated the Formula of Concord. May our Lutheran church never give up the Formula of Concord as its symbol of faith, since it is a clear exposition of the doctrines of Scriptures. If the observance of its 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary is to have any real meaning to us, let us too be on our guard that errorists and unionists do not take over in our midst. Walther, following in the words of Luther, once said: "As much as we love the Gospel, let us watch our seminaries:" Alas, how true was not his warning! Let us not throw stones, think and say that we are different and better than others. Our own attempt to revise the wording of Luther's Small Catechism should open our eyes as to the dangers of losing this very truth in our own midst. Only by a consecrated searching of Scriptures and abiding by the truth shall we be able to continue as a true Lutheran Church and not deteriorate into one in name only.

**God grant it!**