

Luther's Influence at Augsburg Up to June 25

by Armin W. Schuteze

On June 25, 1530, Elector John of Saxony, joined by six Lutheran princes and two cities, presented his Confession in the city of Augsburg before the highest earthly potentate, Charles V, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, King of Spain, etc. The man most responsible for this Confession was not there. He was waiting and studying and praying in the fortress at Coburg, a three to four days' journey from Augsburg. During the two months since April 24, Luther was at Coburg, while his associates with the Elector journeyed to Augsburg and while Melanchthon prepared, in Latin and in German, the Confession that was to be read at the Diet.

This raises the question: To what extent was Luther's influence present at Augsburg? How much did he influence Melanchthon in the final draft of the Confession? To what extent did he influence the action of the men at Augsburg before June 25, when the Confession was presented? We shall look for an answer to these questions by examining the correspondence that passed between Augsburg and Coburg during these two months.

I

The only communication possible between Augsburg and Coburg was by means of letters. Messengers, often hired specifically as couriers, carried the letters. Even then, several days were required to cover the 130 to 140 miles between the two cities as the crow flies.

If we consider the difficulty in sending letters, the number that passed between the two cities is surprising. This leads historians to the rather general comment: "Nevertheless, he (Luther) continued in close touch with the confessors, as appears from his numerous letters written to Augsburg."¹ The impression is sometimes given that Luther directed every move at Augsburg and gave direct approval to every change in the preparation of the *Augsburg Confession*.

According to the Weimar Edition of *Luthers Werke, Briefe*, Volume 5, thirty-six letters passed between Augsburg and Coburg during these two months, if we include the one written by Melanchthon en route from Nuernberg. An equal number was sent each way.

The liveliest correspondence was between Luther and Melanchthon, 9 letters written by Luther, 7 by Melanchthon. Justus Jonas received 3 letters from Luther and sent 6 to Coburg. Twice Luther addressed letters to his Elector John, receiving 3 letters from him. This accounts for 30 of the 36 letters. Except for the one letter written to Philip of Hesse, the remaining 5 are of little concern to us here because of their brevity and the nature of their contents. These are single letters to or from individuals and have no real part in the continuing correspondence.

Are there perhaps letters that have been lost? Is the correspondence we have complete? No final answer can, of course, be given. Nevertheless, in reading the letters one does not receive the impression that an inexplicable gap exists anywhere in the correspondence that could be explained only by assuming the loss of some important letter. One gets the impression that we have the complete sequence of the correspondence.

Of interest, however, for the question we are concerned with are the dates of the letters. These reveal a lengthy period during which correspondence lapsed. Luther sent no letters to Augsburg between May 20 and June 25 except for 4 letters to Melanchthon between June 2 and 7. Of these 4 letters we shall have more to say. Suffice it here to say that they in some respects form a unit by themselves.

What about letters sent to Luther from Augsburg? Melanchthon had written four letters by May 22. Then there is a lapse of over three weeks until June 13 before he wrote again. In fact, during these three weeks Luther received only one letter from Augsburg, written on June 1 by Elector John.

¹ F. Bente, *Historical Introductions to the Symbolical Books in Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis, 1921), p. 15.

This failure to receive news from Augsburg is the central thought that runs through Luther's letters of June 2 to 7. On June 2 Luther sent a brief note with a messenger on his way to Augsburg, complaining to Melanchthon, "You deserve that I write nothing to you, who have permitted the messenger of D. Apel to pass through empty handed."²

Luther wrote a second letter either during the evening of the same day, or, as the note in the Weimar Edition suggests, on June 3. He had received company and now complained that too many people were visiting him. He wrote to Melanchthon: "Therefore you and those with you may in the future speak and write in such a way that one will not look for me here any more... For I wish to be hidden, and in the future you too should consider me as hidden in your words and letters."³ One wonders in view of the previous letter and those that follow whether Luther was writing this with tongue in cheek. His words have a note of irony in them.

Several days later, on June 5, Luther wrote a somewhat longer letter in which he told of his father's death. The letter, however, begins with a word of censure:

In my last letter, my dear Philip, I wrote that we are distressed because you let the messenger return to us empty handed, since there are so many of you and nearly all writers. Now you let a second messenger return equally empty handed; (so), first the messenger of Apel, now even the one who brought wild game from Coburg. I can't wonder enough whether you are so negligent or are displeased, since you know that in this desert that is like parched earth we long for your letters from which we can get to know all your affairs.⁴

A fourth letter was sent to Melanchthon on June 7. It is brief, almost curt. Luther, usually not at a loss for words, doesn't have much to say. His letter reads as follows:

Grace and peace in Christ. I see that you all have agreed to torture us with silence. So that we may not waste away unavenged, we are notifying you with this letter that we shall rival you in silence. And if you perchance make light of this, I praise the Wittenbergers, who, although they are very busy, write 3 times before you, who are idle, write once. I received a word of comfort concerning the death of my dear parent. If you want to know what it was, you can learn that from these letters of Michael Caelius. Here I am putting down my pen lest I render you more silent with my writing. Greet all our people. The grace of God be with you. Amen.⁵

Except for a postscript of a few lines mentioning the flood on the Elbe, that is the letter. Luther's reference to their idleness at Augsburg shows a lack of understanding for the long hours Melanchthon was spending in preparing the Confession. This was the last word received from Luther before the reading of the Confession on June 25. His next letter is dated June 27.

If we sum up, this is what emerges. After May 22, Luther heard almost nothing from Augsburg for over 3 weeks. On the other hand, after May 20, the only letters Luther sent to Augsburg were the four to Melanchthon, and their chief theme was a complaint over not receiving any letters. Although Luther began to receive letters from Melanchthon and Jonas after June 12 and 13, these were not answered until June 27. We can say then that for all practical purposes there was a breakdown in communications between Coburg and Augsburg after May 22. Whatever influence Luther exerted upon his friends at Augsburg by means of his letters was previous to that date.

II

² *D. Martin Luthers Werke, Briefwechsel* (Weimar, 1934), Vol. 5, No. 1580.

³ *Ibid.* No. 1581.

⁴ *Ibid.* No. 1586.

⁵ *Ibid.* No. 1586.

We go on to another question. To what extent did Luther exert an influence upon the drafting of the *Augsburg Confession*? Luther, we know, had a direct hand in preparing the *Torgau Articles*, on which Articles XXII to XXVIII of the *Augsburg Confession* were based. The same is true of the *Schwabach Articles*, that served as basis for Articles I to XXI. What we ask is to what extent Luther influenced the form the Confession acquired at Augsburg.

In the correspondence up to May 22, five letters contain a reference to the Confession that was to be presented at the Diet. Three of these are letters of Melanchthon to Luther. There is one from Elector John to Luther and a reply of Luther to the Elector. This is the only correspondence that comes into consideration here. We shall look at these references in their chronological order.

The first mention of the Confession is in Melanchthon's letter of May 4. He wrote to Luther: "I have rendered the introduction to our apology somewhat more rhetorical than when I wrote it at Coburg. Shortly I shall either bring it myself, or if the prince does not permit this, shall send it."⁶ This refers to the introduction that was originally written by Melanchthon. This introduced the Confession as coming only from the Elector of Saxony. When the other Lutheran princes joined with Saxony in presenting the Confession, Melanchthon's introduction was no longer suitable, and Brueck, the Saxon chancellor, wrote another. Melanchthon at this time speaks of the Confession as an apology, a defense. He also writes of possibly going to Coburg in order to consult personally with Luther about the Confession. In a letter to Veit Dietrich at Coburg on the same day, he mentions this hope to him also. Evidently the prince did not permit the journey, for we know nothing of it.

Instead, a copy of the Confession was sent to Luther on May 11. The Elector and Melanchthon each wrote to Luther on that day. The Elector wrote:

After you and our other learned men at Wittenberg had, at our gracious thought and desire, made a draft of the Articles of Religion which are now in dispute, it is our wish to let you know that Melanchthon has further revised the same and drawn them up in a Form, which we are sending you herewith. And it is our gracious desire that you would feel free to further consider and revise these Articles, and where you deem it wise and well to take away or to add anything, please do so in the margin. Send back the same carefully secured and sealed without delay that we may be ready and prepared for the arrival of his Imperial Majesty, whom we expect in a short time.⁷

Melanchthon wrote to Luther as follows:

Our Apology is being sent you, but in truth it is rather a Confession. For the Emperor has not time to listen to lengthy disputations. Yet I have said that which I believed most useful or proper. On this ground I have succinctly given nearly all the Articles of Faith, since Eck has circulated the most Satanic slanders against us. Over against these, I wished to oppose a remedy. Please give judgment on the whole writing according to your spirit.⁸

From these two letters we see that the *Torgau Articles*, which were drafted as the Elector's defense, were greatly changed by this time. This was caused by the theses that Eck had published, as Melanchthon points out. These theses gave the impression that the Lutherans rejected about every historic Christian doctrine, including even that of the Trinity. It was, therefore, necessary not only to speak of the articles in dispute, but also to make a complete confession of faith. We conclude that at this time already also what we have in Articles I to XXI was presented to Luther in a first draft. What Luther received was a first draft of the entire Confession as it had taken shape by that time. It did not include, however, the introduction that was used on June 25. This was written at a later time to replace Melanchthon's, as we noted above.

⁶ *Ibid.* No. 1561.

⁷ *Ibid.* No. 1564. The translation is from M. Reu, *The Augsburg Confession* (Chicago, 1930), p. 121.

⁸ *Ibid.* No. 1565. Translation from Reu, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

Both Melanchthon and the Elector invited Luther's criticism. They desired his approval. He was to add, to take away or change as he saw fit. They sought to draw him in as fully as possible in the preparation of the Confession.

On May 15 Luther was ready with his reply. He acted with alacrity, as the Elector had asked. In fact, if we figure that it required the courier three days to carry the Confession to Coburg, Luther kept it only one day, drafted his letter to the Elector, and sent it back. He wrote to the Elector about the Confession as follows:

I have read the Apology of M. Philip. It pleases me right well, and I do not know what to improve or change in it; neither would it be proper, for I cannot tread so gently and quietly. Christ our Lord help that it bear much and great fruit, as we hope and pray. Amen.⁹

Luther sent a letter also to Melanchthon on May 15, but no mention is made of the Confession. His chief concern is that Melanchthon should in a sparing manner tell Jonas of the death of his little baby son. Yet this fact does not stop one from wondering why he was completely silent about the Confession to Melanchthon. Evidently he felt the reply to the Elector was adequate.

Did Luther make marginal notations on the copy sent to him, as the Elector suggested? We do not know. However, from his letter to the Elector it would seem not. He wrote that he had no changes to suggest. Perhaps that is why he also did not mention the Confession to Melanchthon. If there had been any doctrinal changes, he surely would have said so. However, as long as the doctrine was correct, he did not want to impose his more forceful manner of expressing it upon the gentle, irenic Melanchthon.

In his letter of May 22, Melanchthon once more addressed himself to Luther regarding the Confession. He wrote:

We are daily making many changes in the apology. The article on oaths I have removed because it was too brief and have put another detailed explanation in its place. Now I am treating the article about the power of the keys. I had wished that you had examined the articles of faith. If according to your thinking no mistakes have been made in them, the rest we shall somehow manage.¹⁰

These words of Melanchthon have caused considerable difficulty. Did he write this before Luther's letter to the Elector had arrived? That seems unlikely, since other portions of his letter indicate that the letters of May 15 had been received. Why then does he say that he "had wished that you would have examined the articles of faith"? Some believe that he submitted the Confession to Luther a second time with this letter. There, however, is no evidence of any kind to lead to this conclusion. One rather gains the impression that Melanchthon believed Luther had not examined especially the articles of faith, which are the first 21 articles, or at least had not examined them as carefully as he had wished. Luther had sent them back very quickly and had made no comments. Is this possibly Melanchthon's way of gently letting Luther know that he was hoping for more comment? Or is it that the Elector had not as yet shown Melanchthon Luther's reply to him regarding the Confession?

Whatever the explanation may be, for our purpose this conclusion is warranted: Luther's influence on the form which the *Augsburg Confession* took during its writing in Augsburg is negligible, if not completely nonexistent. Certainly, as to the doctrinal content, his influence was present through the *Schwabach* and *Torgau Articles*, on which the Confession was based. But his one brief comment to the Elector made no changes in the form of the Confession. He could not have expressed himself, as did Melanchthon. But he did not force Melanchthon to express himself, as he would have done.

⁹ *Ibid.* No. 1568. Translation from Reu, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* No. 1576.

This is true even though it is evident that Melanchthon and the Elector wished that Luther would express himself more fully than he did. Possibly Luther's almost silent reaction to the copy that was sent to him on May 11 played its part in the three weeks' interruption in Melanchthon's correspondence with Luther. There are those who have drawn the conclusion that Melanchthon was disappointed with the summary fashion in which Luther dealt with the first part of the Confession, expressing a sensitivity to this slight. Later we shall hear Melanchthon's explanation of his "silence." Be that as it may, whatever was done at Augsburg in preparing the Confession was not directed, controlled, or influenced in any direct way by Luther. His comments were sought; he gave next to none.

III

Melanchthon sought the help of Luther's influence in gaining the support of Philip of Hesse for the Lutheran cause at Augsburg and for the Confession. Philip had tried to effect a union of Zwingli and the south Germans with Luther. He had arranged for the colloquy in his territory at Marburg the previous year. Since then, the Sacramentarians wooed him, as Zwingli and those who denied the real presence in the Sacrament were called. The Landgrave was quite receptive to their influence and thinking. When Melanchthon heard that Philip was coming to Augsburg, he was concerned that he should not be drawn away from the Lutherans because of the doctrine of the Lord's Supper.

In four letters Melanchthon writes to Luther about this and urges him to write to Philip of Hesse. As early as May 4 this concern is evident in his letter to Luther. He writes:

The chancellor of Hesse, namely Feige, arrived yesterday and affirmed that his prince is on the way. At the same time Schnepf arrived, a very good man and deeply devoted to you. He gave us some hope that his prince could be kept in the course of duty, although he does not conceal that the danger is great. He tells of the great struggle he has with him about the Lord's Supper. He says that he is being pressed in an extraordinary manner by the persistent letters of the Swiss and that almost every month the curial Sturm comes to him saying that he should incite his Lord. This troubles me greatly. Perhaps it would be good if you would write to him or at least to our young prince to confirm the mind of Philip in sound doctrine. It seems that he is often moved by unimportant circumstances.¹¹

Luther acceded to the request of his friend in Augsburg. We have a letter of Luther to Philip of Hesse that bears the date of May 20. Some have questioned the correctness of this date and change it to June 20. However, there is no compelling reason to make the change. There is nothing in the letter that he could not have written on May 20.

In this letter he urges upon Philip not to be "moved by the honeyed words of our opponents, or much rather, that you will not receive the deceitful suggestions and ideas of the devil." He points out that "it is dangerous to receive such a new teaching in contradiction to such a manifestly evident text and to the clear word of Christ, and ... to surrender this ancient faith, which has been held by all Christendom from the beginning till this day." Reminding him of their experiences at Marburg, he writes: "Now I would regret it from the bottom of my heart if Your Princely Grace should become a partaker of their unfounded propositions, misleading obscurities, and blundering false speeches and actions."¹²

In the meantime Philip had arrived in Augsburg on May 12. When Melanchthon wrote to Luther on May 22, he again reported on Philip, although it appeared that he would be won over to the Lutheran cause. Melanchthon wrote:

¹¹ *Ibid.* No. 1561.

¹² *Ibid.* No. 1573. Translation from Reu, *op. cit.*, p. 160f.

Now the Landgrave is thinking that he will subscribe to the statement of our people, and it seems that he can be drawn back to us. But there is need for your letter. Therefore I beg you most urgently (*quam maxime*) to write to him and to exhort him not to burden his conscience with the defense of any kind of false doctrine.¹³

When Melanchthon wrote this to Luther, he couldn't know that the desired letter was already on the way. So he urgently pleaded that Luther might exert his influence on the vacillating Landgrave, who, however, was already being drawn back to the Lutherans.

Melanchthon resumed his correspondence with Luther after the interruption of three weeks. He began his letter of June 13 by an immediate reference to his request that Luther write to the Landgrave and linked this with his failure to write. It appears that he had even then not heard of Luther's letter to Philip. Why not is a puzzle to us. He wrote:

I was so troubled over waiting for your letter to the Landgrave, so that I couldn't write anything in the meantime. For, I asked you to write him a letter, lest he throw himself headlong into the impious affair of the Zwinglians. For, he argues in an amazing manner about this with everyone. Today Henry of Braunschweig made weighty complaints to me about the disputings of the Landgrave in this matter and asked that we should put forth every effort that he may not be torn away from us. The Zwinglians are devising tricky snares for him.¹⁴

Apparently Luther's letter had not had a stabilizing effect on Philip up to this time. In fact, Melanchthon sounds more disturbed in this letter than he was in the one of May 22.

Philip of Hesse did sign the *Augsburg Confession*. But even on the day when the Confession was read at Augsburg, Melanchthon still felt uneasy about him and sought Luther's influence. In his letter of that day he wrote to Luther: "The Landgrave approves of our Confession and has subscribed. You will help much if with your letter you strengthen him concerning the Lord's Supper."¹⁵

From Melanchthon's repeated appeals to Luther, we see that he sought his influence upon Philip of Hesse. He must have believed that it would bear much weight with the Landgrave. Luther did respond with one letter, so far as we know. It does not appear that this had immediate, overwhelming influence upon Philip of Hesse. He appears to have been influenced more by the course of circumstances as they transpired in Augsburg. He signed the Confession. That Luther's letter contributed toward this to a marked degree is not evident from Melanchthon's letters.

IV

Another problem that faced Elector John and the Lutheran princes at Augsburg had to do with preaching, or rather, the prohibition against preaching. Concerning this the opinion of Luther was sought. To what extent did Luther influence the manner in which the Elector reacted to the Emperor's request that the Lutherans desist from preaching at Augsburg? What does the correspondence reveal?

On May 11 both Elector John and Melanchthon asked Luther for an opinion. What should be done if the Emperor forbids them to preach in Augsburg? The Elector inquired quite briefly. He wrote:

We also desire you to know that our representatives at the Imperial court at Innsbruck have written that it is the plan to deal with us on the arrival of his Imperial Majesty, that we should not permit preaching in the churches, as we have begun it. This you will infer from the enclosed

¹³ *Ibid.* No. 1576.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* No. 1589.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* No. 1600.

statement. And although you have drawn up an opinion on this subject, yet I wish your further opinion that we may do right in the sight of God and our conscience.¹⁶

Melanchthon's letter expressed an opinion as to what should be done.

A question is being referred to you, to which I greatly desire an answer from you. There is no doubt the Emperor will prohibit the Zwinglian sermons. We judge from this, that under this pretence our sermons will also be forbidden, for Eisleben is already preaching publicly in a church. Now what is your opinion? Is not the preaching in a public place to be given up, in case the Emperor desires this, if he should wish this in order that the Zwinglian preaching might also be prevented without disturbance? I have answered: one must yield to the will of the Emperor, in whose city we now are guests. But our old man (Dr. Brueck) is difficult to soften. What therefore you think, I beg that you will write it in German on separate paper. Please answer concerning this matter.¹⁷

A few comments are in place. The Elector does not directly state what the possible answer should be. He also mentions an earlier opinion of Luther on this question. Melanchthon lets us know that not all opinions at Augsburg were in agreement. He tells Luther what his own opinion is, but also says that the old man, who is the Saxon Chancellor Brueck and whose advice the Elector would also value, was more adamant. Brueck evidently did not believe that the Lutherans should yield by giving up preaching. Hence Luther's opinion is sought, and he is asked to write it in German, the language Luther used in writing to the Elector. To Melanchthon he always wrote in Latin. The man called Eisleben in Melanchthon's letter is John Agricola.

What was Luther's advice? This was given to the Elector in his letter of May 15. Luther began as follows:

In reply to the question, what should be Your Honor's attitude in case His Imperial Majesty commands Your Electoral Honor to stop the preaching of the Gospel, I answer now as I did before that the Emperor is our lord; the city and everything else belongs to him—just as no one has a right to interfere with any of the orders which you give your city of Torgau.

So far Luther agreed completely with the opinion of Melanchthon. However, in what follows, it seems that Luther modified somewhat what he had written. It is true, he did not advise absolute resistance, but he also did not believe that one should yield too readily. He went on to write:

I should indeed prefer, if it is possible, that a wise and appropriate attempt be made to change His Imperial Majesty's intention in this respect and that His Imperial Majesty be humbly petitioned not to prohibit our preaching without any investigation but rather to order someone to listen to our preachers. His Imperial Majesty should not prohibit the pure and unadulterated preaching of the Scriptures; our men do not preach enthusiastic or rebellious sermons. But if that is of no avail, we will have to suffer this injustice. We have done what we could and are absolved from blame.¹⁸

Although Luther advised attempting to convince the Emperor that he should not prohibit preaching, his final advice still is to submit to the authority of the Emperor. In so far, we can say that his advice is essentially the same as Melanchthon's.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* No. 1565. Translation from Reu, *op. cit.*, p. 121f.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* No. 1565. Translation from Reu, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* No. 1568. Translation from Reu, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

How did the Elector react to the prohibition when it was made? Did he follow the advice of Melanchthon and Luther? On May 24 the Emperor sent word asking quite politely that there be no preaching until he himself would arrive at Augsburg and could arrange everything. On May 31 the Elector responded, saying they could not yield to this request. The Elector reported this to Luther in his letter of June 1.

The issue came to a head when the Emperor arrived on June 15. Jonas, Melanchthon, and the Elector all report to Luther in their letters after June 18. The Emperor arrived at Augsburg in procession with the Elector, according to custom, carrying a sword before him. Immediately that very evening the Emperor repeated his request that preaching cease. Melanchthon reports that the dispute continued for three days, since “our people simply did not want to discontinue the preaching.”¹⁹ Finally the Emperor proclaimed that *all* preaching must be stopped, and men were designated who should simply read the Gospel and the Epistle without explanation. The feelings of the Elector become evident in his comment: “And so the Lord God must remain silent at this Diet.”²⁰

It is clear that the Lutheran princes and especially the Elector took a more adamant position in the question of the preaching than had been advised by Melanchthon and also by Luther. It appears that the advice of Chancellor Brueck, whom Melanchthon had looked upon as an old man who was difficult to soften, must have had its influence. Luther recognized that the Elector had not followed his somewhat milder course. He did not, however, criticize him for it. Later in his Table Talk he referred to what happened and commended the Elector saying, “He conducted himself like a hero.”²¹

How extensive was the influence that Luther exerted upon his associates at Augsburg during the two months while the *Augsburg Confession* was in preparation? This is what we find. 1. The means of communication were interrupted. Although a sufficient number of letters passed between Luther and his friends, there was a breakdown in communication. 2. His friends welcomed assistance and advice. They did ask him to comment on the first draft of the Confession. They sought his help in regard to Philip of Hesse and the prohibition against preaching. They were looking for his support and advice, to which they were accustomed at Wittenberg. 3. Luther did not give nearly as much advice as one might expect. He had no appreciable part in giving shape to the *Augsburg Confession*. His letter to Philip and advice on the matter of preaching had no great influence. He was too far removed from the scene of action.

This does not mean that the actions of the men at Augsburg were a denial of what Luther stood for. The Confession still was his, confessing the doctrine he had taught from the Scriptures. Their firmness in confessing also was characteristic of him. At Worms he had appeared alone before Charles V. At Augsburg a group of princes and cities took his place. And even though he could not and did not directly tell them what to do and how to speak, the results were the same as if he had been there.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* No. 1591.

²⁰ *Ibid.* No. 1603.

²¹ *D. Martin Luthers Werke, Tischreden* (Weimar, 1914), Vol. 3, No. 2934a.