

Luther's Deathbed Confession—the Smalcald Articles

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The Smalcald Articles have been called Luther's "deathbed confession." In a literal sense they were not; they were written in 1536, more than nine years before his death. Yet, in a very real sense, they were his "deathbed confession."

The Smalcald Articles were written by a man who, for much of his adult life, labored in the shadow of death. Heinrich Boehmer writes in *Luther and the Reformation in the Light of Modern Research*:

Luther, from his fortieth year onwards, was a sick man. After he had suffered for six months, in 1521, from severe digestive troubles, he was attacked in 1523 by a nervous affection of the head, which soon became permanent. In 1526 he developed a severe stone in the kidneys, with all possible accompaniments—feverish rheumatism, sciatic conditions, boils, etc. In addition to this he suffered very frequently from obstinate catarrh and digestive trouble, also, transitorily, from hemorrhoids (1525), dysentery (1528), a running inflammation of the ears (1537) which for weeks deprived him of sleep and hearing; toothache and fearful constriction of the chest (1527).¹

A heart attack caused his death in 1546. Luther once remarked, "I am a veritable Lazarus, greatly tried by sickness."

During his bouts with severe afflictions death hovered before his eyes. These attacks reminded him of his approaching end. Koestlin, in his *Life of Luther*, reports that when Luther's condition was desperate at Smalcald in the winter of 1537, he cried to God, "Behold, I die an enemy of Thy enemies, cursed and banned by Thy foe, the Pope. May he, too, die under Thy ban, and both of us stand at Thy judgment bar in that day."² During this illness he gave Bugenhagen some final directions, which the latter afterwards committed to writing as the "Confession and Last Testament of the Venerable Father." When he was ready to leave Smalcald in 1537, believing that his end was not far removed, he had chosen his epitaph: *Pestis eram vivus, moriens ero mors tua, Papa!*

Luther was not a neurotic. He did not imagine his ailments. On the one hand he believed that his physical and nervous disorders could be responsible for his periods of depression. At the same time he said, "If the heart is worried and sad, weakness of the body will follow." As Plass points out in *This Is Luther*, "The burden of care upon his heart was not without effect upon his general health."³

Luther's consciousness of imminent death pervades his antiphonal hymn *Mitten wir im Leben sind*:

In the midst of earthly life
Snares of death surround us;
Who shall help us in the strife
Lest the foe confound us?
Thou only, Lord, Thou only!

This death-awareness lent a special earnestness to his later writings.

When a man who is conscious of the snares of death continually surrounding him is asked to set down a statement of his faith and hope, he composes a last will and testament, not theories for experiment, not theses for debate. In the Smalcald Articles the Luther who had, on more than one occasion, stood at death's door wrote a "deathbed confession" nearly a decade before the Lord of life and death called his servant out of this life.

Elector John Frederick, Luther's prince, was well aware of Luther's mortality. He was so alarmed by Luther's illness at Smalcald, for example, that he sent a message to Luther's wife, that she might come to meet her husband before he died on his way home to Wittenberg. The elector had been opposed to the general council Pope Paul III convoked to meet at Mantua, May 8, 1537, to settle the religious controversy between Lutherans and Catholics. He had maintained that the papal invitation must be declined because acceptance involved the recognition of the Pope "as the head of the Church and of the council." He felt strongly that Lutherans should never submit to the Pope's arrogated authority. Persuaded at length by the Wittenberg theologians that the more politic and at the same time courageous course of action would be to attend the council at Mantua, the Elector commissioned Luther to draw up articles for consideration at the council. His charge to Luther also reflects the "deathbed confession" tenor of the Smalcald Articles.

As reported in F. Bente's *Historical Introductions to the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Concordia Triglotta*, the Elector wrote to Luther: "It will...be very necessary for Doctor Martin to prepare his foundation and opinion from the Holy Scriptures, namely, the articles as hitherto taught, preached, and written by him, at the council, as well as at his departure from this world and before the judgment of Almighty God, and in which one cannot yield without becoming guilty of treason against God, even though property and life, peace or war, are at stake."⁴

Luther's response to the Elector's commission was in keeping with the Elector's concern for Luther's mortal state. Luther viewed his articles as his testament. In his preface to the articles Luther expressed this concern: "I have determined to publish these articles in plain print, so that, should I die before there will be a council...those who live and remain after my demise may be able to produce my testimony and confession in addition to the Confession which I previously issued, whereby up to this time I have abided and by God's grace will abide."⁵

In his conclusion to the articles Luther wrote: "These are the articles on which I must stand, and, God willing, shall stand even to my death; and I do not know how to change or to yield anything in them. If any one wishes to yield anything, let him do it at the peril of his conscience."⁶ Luther wrote the Smalcald Articles with death in his consciousness.

A "deathbed confession" is also a final word to those who hear and read it. It is the final casting up of accounts, the final distillation of the meaning of one's life and work. The Smalcald Articles were such a confession. They were the quintessence of his faith and his doctrine, the fruit of twenty years of theological struggle and maturing.

Such a confessional statement by Martin Luther was needed, despite his approval of the Augsburg Confession when it was formulated in 1530. He called it *Confessio Augustana mea*. Melancthon declared its doctrinal content to be *iuxta sententiam Lutheri*. The Formula of Concord aligns itself with the Augsburg Confession, "the symbol of our time." The Augsburg Confession is, historically and intrinsically, the fundamental and key confessional statement of the Lutheran church.

Despite his advisory role in the formulation of the Augustana, however, and even though he praised it as a *pulcherrima confessio*," and rejoiced over its "victory" at Augsburg, Luther was not fully satisfied with Melancthon's effort. He saw weaknesses in it. "*Ich kann nicht so leise treten*," he declared. His strictures in a letter to Jonas were more pointed: "The devil still lives, and he has noticed very well that your Apology [i.e., the Augustana] steps softly, and that it has veiled the articles of Purgatory, the Adoration of the Saints, and especially that of the Antichrist, the Pope."⁷ In fact, he wrote, "*apologiam vestram, die Leisetreterin, dissimulasse*."⁸ He felt that Melancthon had tried to minimize the differences between the Roman and the Protestant teachings. Yet, in 1530 "Luther was not interested in reducing the teachings of the Lutheran *Landeskirche* to a set of dogmas, and it was probably for this reason that he never supplanted the Augsburg Confession with a more comprehensive statement of Lutheran belief, as requested by the Emperor toward the close of the Diet [of Augsburg]."⁹

The hopes and expectations of the Lutherans at Augsburg were that a reconciliation between Lutherans and Catholics might be effected by a reasoned and moderate confessional statement by the Lutherans. The emperor's assignment to the Diet was, "How best to deal with and determine the differences and division in the

holy faith and the Christian religion.” He desired that “every man’s opinions, thoughts and notions should be heard in love and charity, and carefully weighed, and that men should thus be brought in common to Christian truth, and be reconciled,”¹⁰ although the Emperor did not mean that the two opposing parties should negotiate with each other as equals.

These hopes of reconciliation were dashed by subsequent events. The Emperor was not a neutral judge. The Catholic Confutation (of the Augsburg Confession) was acrimonious and scurrilous. The positive and even polemical tone of Melancthon’s Apology also discouraged reconciliation. Popes Clement VII and Paul III kept putting off arrangements for a free Christian council “to settle finally the problem of reform.” Even though the Emperor’s political exigencies required the cooperation of Protestant leaders, and even though he did not enforce severe restrictions on Protestant activities, the Pope’s hard line kept the Emperor from making any real concessions to the reform movement.

On the other side, the Protestants had also solidified their position. Their political leaders formed the Smalcald League in 1531. The effect of the unfruitful negotiations at Augsburg also gave Lutheranism impetus toward independence rather than reconciliation. Like the American colonies prior to the Revolution, the Protestant “colonies” were moving toward independence from the Catholic “mother country” rather than toward a settlement of difference. Hanns Lilje writes:

*Zum ersten Male steht die neu gewordene Kirche der Reformation der alten Kirche gegenueber, nicht mehr noch halb in ihr, wie bei der Augsburgischen Konfession. Sie ist nicht mehr nur Reformbewegung innerhalb der roemischen Kirche, nicht mehr nur eine theologische “Richtung,” nicht mehr nur eine provinzielle oder innerdeutsche Angelegenheit—das alles haette man zur Zeit der Confessio Augustana noch vermuten koennen; sondern es ist etwas Neues entstanden. Der reformatorische Fruehling mir Sturm und Drang geht zu Ende; zum ersten Male reift das Feld und ist weisz zur Ernte.*¹¹

Meanwhile Luther was becoming increasingly pessimistic about the success of the evangelical movement. Certainly his physical condition contributed to his growing depression, though he retained his steadfast faith in the God of grace and truth. Luther continued to publish valuable Reformation literature between 1530 and 1537, but except for his concluding lectures on Galatians and for completing his translation of the Old Testament in 1534, he did not match in significance his output in the thirteen years preceding 1530. He also saw that the momentum of the movement was slowing down. The papacy showed no signs of becoming more reasonable and accommodating. It became increasingly clear that the Roman church was hardening itself in its apostasy from the truth.

The times called for an additional statement in 1537. Luther, indeed, no longer had any hope of reconciling the Lutheran and the Catholic positions through a Christian council. In his Preface to the Smalcald Articles he stated: “The Pope would see all Christendom perish and all souls be damned rather than suffer either himself or his adherents to be reformed even a little.”¹² A confession at a council convened by a pope who said the purpose of the council would be “the utter extirpation of the poisonous pestilential Lutheran heresy” would be futile.

But Elector John Frederick had called upon Luther to set forth his confession in preparation for a council, even if his confession merely reiterated what he had hitherto taught, preached, and written. How could he fail to be galvanized to bold confession by the request of this sturdy, forthright, resolute defender of the faith who trusted Luther and relied on his integrity and truth? He hoped also that the outcome of the council would, in the end, benefit poor souls who had not heard the gospel. The concern of the Reformers was for the people; at Smalcald, Luther’s concern was also for the people.

But at Smalcald the concerns of Luther the confessor were uppermost. In view of his uneasiness about the Augsburg Confession and the need to firm up the Lutheran confessional position in a sterner day, he accepted the assignment to produce a positive statement of the truth, both because he had a formal and official

opportunity to correct the weaknesses of Melancthon's document, and also because he wanted to remove any doubt about his own testimony and confession in the real theological world of 1537.

The difference between Luther and Melancthon was evident in the latter's reaction to the alteration Luther made in his article on the Lord's Supper. Originally Luther had written, in keeping with the wording of the Wittenberg Concord of 1536, "that the true body and blood of Christ is under the bread and wine." When Luther became aware of the desire of such South German delegates as Bucer, Blaurer and Wolfart to avoid offending the Zwinglians, Luther sharpened his definition of the Lord's Supper to read: "That the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper are the true body and blood of Christ." Luther desired a union with the Zwinglians but "not on the basis of misunderstanding and self-deception." Melancthon took strong offense at this change and maneuvered, in Luther's absence from the Smalcald deliberations, to restore the Wittenberg Concord wording. Theodor Kolde relates:

Melancthon reported to the Landgrave: "One article, that concerning the Sacrament of the Holy Supper, has been drawn up somewhat vehemently, in that it states that the bread *is* the body of the Lord, which Luther at first did not draw up in this form, but, as contained in the [Wittenberg] Concord, namely, that the body of the Lord is given with the bread; and this was due to Pomeranus [Bugenhagen], for he is a vehement and a coarse Pomeranian."¹³

Lutheranism had to be defined clearly, both over against Catholic but also over against Reformed teaching. To survive in a world still largely Catholic, Lutheranism needed to state its position more positively. It needed to go on the offensive. It needed both to raise its banner and to circle its wagons. In the Smalcald Articles Luther did both. In so doing, he produced articles that conveyed both assuredness and reassurance.

The result was a "deathbed confession," not only a confession produced in the shadow of his own death, but also a confession that reflected the explicitness, the positiveness, the earnestness of a last spiritual testament to his church. Hear the ring of its conviction. Listen to its firm, unwavering tones.

Of this article [The Office and Word of Jesus Christ] nothing can be yielded or surrendered, even though heaven and earth, and whatever will not abide, should sink to ruin.

The Mass in the Papacy must be the greatest and most horrible abomination, as it directly and powerfully conflicts with the chief article [Of Our Redemption].

It is not a wicked or a godly hireling of the Mass with his own work, but the Lamb of God and the Son of God, that taketh away our sins.

The Word of God should establish articles of faith, and no one else, not even an angel.

This teaching [of the supremacy of the Papacy] shows forcefully that the Pope is the very Antichrist, who has exalted himself above, and opposed himself against Christ, because he will not permit Christians to be saved without his power.

God does not wish to deal with us otherwise than through the spoken Word and the Sacraments.

It is the devil himself whatsoever is extolled as Spirit without the Word and Sacraments.

We do not concede to them that they are the Church, and they are not; nor will we listen to those things which, under the name of Church, they enjoin or forbid.

Small wonder that before Luther's death this "deathbed confession" of the Lutheran Church "had begun to displace the importance of the Augsburg Confession and the Apology as the official Lutheran position on many doubtful points."¹⁴ The positive clarity of the Smalcald Articles earned them a place among the Confessions of the Lutheran church, even though the representatives at Smalcald did not formally and officially adopt them there. They did, however, subscribe to them voluntarily as individuals (except for the Bucerinns). It was not merely Luther's name that assured confessional status for the Smalcald Articles; it was the positive and timely Lutheranism of his articles. Bente makes this point well:

To rank among the symbolical books, Luther's articles required a special resolution on the part of the princes and estates as little as did his two catechisms; contents and the Reformer's name were quite sufficient. On their own merits they won their place of honor in our Church. In keeping with the changed historical context of the times, they offered a correct explanation of the Augsburg Confession, adding thereto a declaration concerning the Papacy, the absence of which had become increasingly painful. They struck the timely, logical, Lutheran note also against the Zwinglian and Bucerian [Reformed and Unionistic] tendencies. In brief, they gave such a clear expression to genuine Lutheranism that false spirits would not remain in their company. [For loyal Lutherans] the Smalcald Articles presented an up-to-date touchstone of the pure Lutheran truth, ...and, in taking their stand on them, their feet were planted on ground immovable.¹⁵

“*Luther lebt!*” the messenger cried out in Smalcald when he joyously reported Luther's miraculous recovery from the severe attack that incapacitated him during the meeting. In the midst of death he lived. In the midst of his “deathbed confession” Luther the confessor and true Lutheranism live today.

Endnotes

¹ Heinrich Boehmer, *Luther and the Reformation in the Light of Modern Research*, tr. by E.S.G. Potter, (New York: Mac Veagn, 1930) p 186.

² Julius Koestlin, *Life of Luther*, tr. for Longmans, Green, and Co., (New York: 1905) p 406.

³ Ewald M. Plass, *This Is Luther*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1948) p 180.

⁴ G.Fr. Bente, editor with W.H.T. Dau of the *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921) p 52.

⁵ Bente, *op. cit.*, p 52.

⁶ Bente, *op. cit.*, p 53.

⁷ Bente, *op. cit.*, p 20.

⁸ Bente, *op. cit.*, p 20.

⁹ E.G. Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950) p 730.

¹⁰ Koestlin, *op. cit.*, p 340.

¹¹ Hanns Lilje, *D. Martin Luthers Schmalkaldische Artikel* (Berlin: *Im Furche-Verlag*) p 15. Lilje states: “For the first time the newly developed Church of the Reformation stood over against the old Church, no longer still half in her, as at the time of the Augsburg Confession. She is no longer only a reform movement within the Roman Church, no longer only a theological tendency, no longer only a provincial or intra-German development—all this one could still have assumed at the time of the Augsburg Confession. On the contrary, something new has come into being. The springtime of the Reformation with its storm and stress has ended; for the first time the field is ripened and white to harvest.”

¹² Bente, *op. cit.*, p 455.

¹³ Bente, *op. cit.*, p 55.

¹⁴ Schwiebert, *op. cit.*, p 743.

¹⁵ Bente, *op. cit.*, pp 58–59.