

Sermon- The Augsburg Confession

We live in an age of religious consumerism. People shop churches like they shop grocery stores. The churches in their immediate area are a religious cafeteria from which they can pick and choose. Some people are looking for a church that makes them feel good. Some are looking for a church with a charismatic preacher. Some are looking for churches that have a political agenda. They shop until they find the type of church they're looking for and there they roost—until that church does something that gets their nose out of joint. Then, like any dissatisfied customer, they vote with their feet and start shopping again.

It's not surprising that this view of churches has arisen in a society which places such a high value on individual freedom. Our declaration of independence is based upon the innate right of every individual to "...life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" and the first amendment to the constitution guarantees freedom of religious choice. But the passion for religious freedom goes back long before the *Declaration Of Independence* and *The Constitution*.

Roger Williams, the Puritan turned Baptist who founded the city of Providence, Rhode Island, in 1636 rejected all forms of what he called "organized religion" in favor of "freedom of individual conscience." Religion for him was "intensely private" and there was no place for the imposition of creeds or doctrines or ecclesiastical authority, William Penn thought that conscience was the "divine spark" which God placed in man, and that anything which intruded on one's private religious life also intruded on one's relationship with God. Later religious philosophers like Emerson and Thoreau abandoned Christianity altogether to pursue god's revelation of himself through nature and the "inner light" of meditation. The great American poet Walt Whitman carried such thinking to the extreme by worshiping God in birds and boats and blades of grass. The harvest of this historic trend is a wide variety of freestanding churches which are not the least bit interested in placing themselves under any ecclesiastical or confessional authority. The theology of the church is entrusted to the spiritual discernment of the Pastor in consultation with the leaders of the church. Since many of these freestanding churches are doing rather well, it is worth asking whether creeds and systems of doctrine are all that important anymore.

To answer that question, let's consider how man has historically chosen to worship God when he is left on his own. The first form of worship man came up with was polytheism: the worship of nature and of what were thought to be gods that governed nature. There was a god of rain, a god of fire, a god of fertility and so forth. Men would offer sacrifices up to these nature gods in hopes of persuading them to give them whatever they wanted: rain, children, whatever. When Yahweh Elohim revealed himself to Abraham as the one and only God of heaven and earth, monotheism was born. Yahweh promised Abraham that in return for his worship he would bless all his descendants.

Later, at Mount Sinai, Yahweh gave Moses clear instructions about how Abraham's descendants were to worship him. But when Moses had descended from Mount Sinai with the God's instructions in his hands, he found that the descendants of father Abraham had built a golden calf and were worshipping it. They chose pagan worship over the worship of the Lord of heaven and earth. Subsequent generations of Israelites followed the same pattern. During the period of the judges everyone "did what was right in his own eyes." During the entire era of the kings—from Saul to Zedekiah—the Israelites built pagan shrines all over Israel and worshipped Canaanite nature gods like Baal and Ashtoreth. From the beginning, people have preferred to make up their own gods and worship them rather than worship the Lord of heaven and earth. They fail to realize that gods that man creates out of his own imagination are by definition imaginary gods--and imaginary gods can't help us.

Later, when God came in the form of his son, Jesus Christ, he established his church and said that the gates of hell would not stand against it. Jesus made it clear that he was the son of God and that what he taught came directly from God. But almost as soon as Jesus ascended into heaven, some members of his church began to question whether Jesus was the son of God. Some who called themselves "adoptionists" maintained that Jesus was merely a man whom God had adopted as his son. Others called themselves "docetists" and claimed that Jesus had no physical body at all but was only a sort of divine hologram. A man named Arius taught that Jesus was not the begotten son of God, but only a created man like all other humans. And there were many more. These teachers and their adherents came to be known as heretics and their false teachings as heresies, or lies. The heretics all had one thing in common: they taught something different from what Jesus had taught. They trusted their own imagination and powers of reason over the Word of God. Jesus had said, "If you continue in my Word, then you will know the truth...." But they believed that if they continued in their reasoning and their imagining, they would find the truth. Later, the three great creeds of the church—the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed—were formulated to refute heresies and clarify the basic teachings or doctrines of the new testament. That's why we confess the creeds every time we worship: to keep our thinking in line with God's word and not go off on a tangent.

The creeds put the heresies to rest, but about twelve centuries later, a new question arose which sent shock waves through the entire church and started a drama that would change the course of Christian history. The basic question was: where does the church get its authority? The traditional view was that the church derived its authority from Jesus through a line of popes that began with Peter. The reformers, led by Luther, agreed that the church derived its authority from Jesus, but that he conferred his authority through his word, and not through popes.

Predictably, a battle erupted between the reformers and the ecclesiastical hierarchy of Rome. The Pope demanded that Luther recant and submit to papal authority. Luther refused to do so and was excommunicated. Things heated up and Luther was commanded by the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire to appear at the city of Worms and recant his views. Luther went to Worms as he was commanded, but he refused to recant. He was immediately placed under what was called the imperial ban, which was a sentence of death. Under the imperial ban, all citizens of the Holy Roman Empire were commanded to either kill Luther or turn him over to those who would. During the following decade a lot of maneuvering took place between the three major parties to the dispute Luther had ignited. First was Pope Leo who wanted to be rid of Luther at all costs. Second was Charles the Fifth of Spain, the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire and an ally of the Pope, who also wanted to be rid of Luther. Third was Luther and the reformers who were being protected by the German princes. A fault line had appeared between Germany and the rest of the Holy Roman Empire and war seemed imminent. Finally, the Emperor Charles called a meeting of all three parties at the City of Augsburg in southern Germany to settle the dispute. The stated intention was to iron out their differences, but the real purpose was to force the reformers to abandon their position and submit to the authority of the Church of Rome. Luther was so despised by the papists that they would not lift the ban and allow him to attend the meeting, so he stayed at Coburg Castle, about a day's journey north of Augsburg. Since he couldn't attend, Luther appointed his associate, Philip Melancthon, to accompany the German princes who arrived at Augsburg on May 2nd of 1530. Almost immediately they infuriated the Roman Catholics and the emperor by refusing to kneel and receive Pope Leo's blessing and by refusing to participate in a Corpus Christi parade. The emperor summoned the German princes into his presence and demanded that they return to the fold of the Roman Catholic Church. Prince George, the margrave of Brandenburg, responded for them all by saying, "before I let them take away the word of God, I will kneel and let them take my head." It was a clear threat of war within the Holy Roman Empire, and the Emperor quickly retracted his demand.

Finally, on the last day of the diet, the emperor allowed the Lutherans to read their confession of faith. An attorney by the name of Christian Beyer stepped forward and all the German princes rose to their feet. In a loud, clear voice, Beyer read what came to be known as *the Augsburg Confession*. The effect was immediate and electric. Five Catholic princes immediately professed their adherence to it. Duke William of Bavaria said, "never before has this matter and doctrine been presented to me in this manner!" The Emperor asked the Pope's personal representative, "can we refute this?" He responded, "with the church fathers—yes; with the scriptures—no. The emperor responded: "really? So we rest on the church fathers and the Lutherans rest upon the scriptures!"

The Augsburg Confession became the foundation of the Lutheran church and the theological basis for the protestant reformation. It still stands as the clearest exposition and defense of the Christian religion outside of the bible itself. Even the Church of Rome has finally acknowledged its scriptural accuracy.

How important is doctrine? St. Paul wrote in the sixth chapter of his *Letter to the Romans*: “Thanks be to God that though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of doctrine to which you were entrusted. “What Paul is saying is that the teachings, the doctrines of scripture, set us free from the doctrines of man.. Things which we are taught can come to have great power over us. If we are taught man-made doctrines we will remain captives of the human imagination. If we are taught the doctrines of God, we will be connected to the truth. The first way is slavery; the second way is freedom.

Last Thursday, June 25th, was the 490th anniversary of the reading of the Augsburg Confession. It was not constructed out of human reasoning or human imagination. It was built on the solid rock of ages: the Living Word of God. Amen.