

Creeds and Confessions

In addition to the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, which is confessed at celebrations of the Lord's Supper, and the Athanasian Creed, often read on Holy Trinity Sunday, are universal statements of faith held by the Lutheran Church. Both concentrate especially on the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The Lutheran Church also accepts without reservation all the documents contained in The Book of Concord of 1580 as a true and unadulterated statement and exposition of the Word of God. The best known and most widely used of these is Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism.

Born November 10, 1483, in Eisleben, Germany, Luther attended the University of Erfurt, regarded as the best of schools particularly in law and liberal arts. Soon after, however, he requested to be admitted to the Augustinian order. In 1507 he was consecrated a priest and later obtained a doctorate in theology. His break with the Roman Catholic Church in 1521 occurred after he was told to recant what he believed to be Scriptural teachings contrary to those of the Roman Church.

Luther's Small Catechism and his Large Catechism, completed in 1529, were originally intended to be helpful manuals for pastors and family heads in teaching God's Word to children and adults. The Large Catechism is not made up of questions and answers but presents basic Christian teachings in a form often used in sermons.

Another well-known statement of faith, the Augsburg Confession, was written by Philip Melancthon and read before Emperor Charles V at Augsburg, Germany, in 1530. While friendly in tone, it was adopted as a testimony against abuses prevalent in the church and against the errors of certain reformers regarding such crucial doctrines as original sin and the sacraments.

In 1531 Melancthon wrote the Apology (Defense) of the Augsburg Confession. It too became an official confession of faith among Lutherans by its adoption at Smalcald, Germany, in 1537. In great detail it answers criticisms of the Augsburg Confession. Virtually half of the Apology is devoted to the Biblical doctrine of justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

The Smalcald Articles were written by Luther in 1536 and signed by many clergy present at Smalcald in 1537. The Articles are a summary of Luther's main disagreements with the Roman Church. Melancthon's Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope was also officially adopted at Smalcald.

The Formula of Concord, completed in 1577, served to resolve doctrinal differences among Lutherans and was approved by over 8,000 theologians, pastors, and teachers by 1580. It was not a new confession but an exposition and defense of the previously adopted writings.

Quotations from these writings are included in this explanation of the Small Catechism.