

## Chapter 14

### *Protestantism Takes Shape*

At intervals throughout the sixteenth century, and in various places, Protestant groups were compiling and publishing a range of documents which set out their developing beliefs and principles. These took several different forms, though many of them were in the nature of formal confessions or statements of faith. Some were more comprehensive than others, but this was frequently due to the fact that they were not all intended to serve the same purposes. Some had only a limited application, while others were meant to be much wider in scope. They did not all follow the same conventions as far as style was concerned, but it has to be kept in mind that the mediaeval Church had not left much of a precedent for compiling documents of this nature. The codification of doctrine was not commonly found in Catholicism: the main method of giving expression to formal beliefs was through the liturgical recitation of the ancient creeds, or the declaring of principles laid down in the writings of the Church Fathers, supplemented by occasional pronouncements from the Papacy. The setting out of carefully structured doctrinal documents was a skill which still had to be developed and refined. Furthermore, it was never the intention of the reforming groups to abandon or replace the historic creeds. Indeed, these were frequently quoted or embodied within some of the Reformation confessions of faith, as, for example, in the great *Book of Concord* of 1580, which, in Germany, became virtually the definitive statement of Lutheran orthodoxy. This will be touched upon again shortly.

If we are to appreciate the way in which the emerging Protestant teachings gradually developed out of the statements made by the pioneers of reform, it is to these documents themselves that we have to turn. There were far too many of them for us to attempt a thorough analysis, so we must confine our survey to those which stand out as being of special significance, and we can take the Lutheran writings first because they were in general somewhat earlier in date.

#### *The Augsburg Confession*

As a convenient starting-point we can look again at a document to which we have already referred (see Chapter 6), in connection with Martin Luther and his colleague Philip Melancthon, since it was the preparation of the *Augsburg Confession* which produced the first genuinely Protestant confessional statement. As we noted, this was almost certainly masterminded by Melancthon, though Luther's own hand is also detectable, especially in the earlier drafts. The Holy

Roman Emperor, Charles V, had asked for an account to be drawn up which would outline the Protestant teachings, in order to

*give a charitable hearing to every man's opinions, thoughts and notions, to understand them, to balance them, to bring and reconcile them to a unity in Christian truth. . . .*

and he hoped to do this at the Diet of Augsburg, which he had called to meet on 8 April, 1530. The resulting *Augsburg Confession* was signed by seven princes and by representatives of the German cities of Nuremberg and Reutlingen. It was then read aloud to the Emperor. Records suggest that Luther was not altogether satisfied with it, because he felt that too many concessions had been made in the direction of Rome. Melancthon also made further changes to it within a matter of months of its publication.

Its articles covered two areas. Firstly, it set out the central teachings of Lutheranism, and secondly, it identified the way in which particular Catholic abuses had been rectified in Luther's proposals. The twenty-one articles of faith contained in the first section dealt with the following themes:

1. **The Nature of God:** this was simply a repetition of the traditional Nicene Trinitarian formula.
2. **Original Sin:** here it was affirmed that, following from the "fall" of Adam, the whole of humanity is born into a sinful condition, bringing eternal death to all those who are not reborn through Christian Baptism. Added to this was the statement that no-one can be justified in the sight of God through the exercise of human reason alone.
3. **Christ, the Son of God:** this section affirmed the teachings of the Apostles' Creed, expanding upon them by adding that Christ's sacrifice was an offering not only for "original sin", but also for actual sinful behaviour.
4. **Forgiveness of Sins:** here again the *Confession* dealt with the question of justification by faith alone. No-one can be justified before God by his or her own personal merits or good works. God grants justification out of his own pure and free grace through Christ.
5. **The Church's Ministry:** the work of the ministry was held to be the delivery and the implementation of the above doctrines, since the Word and the sacraments are the means whereby the Holy Spirit is imparted.
6. **The New Obedience:** this article explained that good works are the natural fruits of faith, and that the ability to keep God's laws is itself one of God's gifts and is not derived from human effort.
7. **The Church:** this section set out the characteristic Lutheran view of the true Christian Church as a congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the sacraments properly administered. The article adds that Church unity is essentially one-ness of belief and harmony in the administering of the sacraments. It is not uniformity of practice, which is considered to be unnecessary in every point of detail.

8. **The Nature of the Church:** following on from the preceding article, this put forward the Lutheran argument that the sacraments are effective and valid in their own right, and are not dependent upon the religious or moral perfection of the ministers who celebrate them.
9. **Christian Baptism:** this sacrament is deemed to be necessary to salvation, and its purpose is to offer children to God, over against the Anabaptist teachings which were then current.
10. **The Eucharist:** the body and blood of Christ are affirmed as being truly present in the elements of bread and wine, and are distributed, or made available, to all who partake.
11. **Private Confession:** it was agreed that the custom of granting private absolution from sin after Confession should continue, but only on the condition that not every sin needs to be listed.
12. **Repentance (Penitence):** here the *Augsburg Confession* allows that it is always open to sinners to repent, and, where they genuinely do so in sorrow for their offences, they should be granted absolution.
13. **The Use of the Sacraments:** it was denied that the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist operate independently of the faith of the recipient, as was being taught by the Catholic Church. The sacraments were ordained to be the marks of Christian profession, and also as signs and evidences of God's will for his people, to stimulate and to validate faith.
14. **Ecclesiastical Order:** no-one can officiate in the Church unless he has been properly called to that office.
15. **Church Rites:** only those rites and customs should be retained which are capable of being observed "without sin", and which genuinely promote peace and good order. It was regarded as wrong to impose these actions upon any whose conscience was troubled by observing them, since in themselves such practices (e.g. fasting or the keeping of holy days) do not bring about salvation.
16. **Civil Affairs:** civil governments are held to be legitimate under God. The criminal law, military service, contractual obligations, ownership of property, the taking of oaths under the direction of the magistrates and civil marriage are all regarded as allowable. Every Christian must accept the responsibilities that come with citizenship, and those who conscientiously object to such involvement are criticised.
17. **Eschatology (i.e. the "Last Days"):** this article dismisses Anabaptist teachings concerning a final and universal salvation, which would include both saints and sinners. Only God's elect will enjoy eternal happiness.
18. **Free Will:** despite the earlier emphasis on justification by faith alone, here it is said that human beings have a limited freedom to make their own decisions in everyday affairs, but this is counterbalanced by the statement that the human will cannot of itself achieve God's righteousness.

19. **The Cause of Sin:** sin is defined as being caused by a will, which, of its own accord, deliberately turns away from God.
20. **Faith and Works:** this is a lengthy article which spells out once again the doctrine of justification by faith alone, and not by works. It repudiates the false accusations of those who were alleging that Lutheranism did not permit Christians to perform any good works at all, arguing that they are to be understood as the fruits of faith, and not as the conditions of it.
21. **The Cult of the Saints:** this final article teaches that although the saints should be remembered as examples of faith, Scripture offers no support for the Catholic practice of invoking their help in times of need.

In a concluding statement to the first section, the *Augsburg Confession* says that the doctrines referred to above are all soundly Scriptural and thoroughly orthodox. They are fully in line with the teachings of the ancient Church Fathers, and where the Lutheran liturgy differs from the Catholic, it does so only at those points where current abuses have been corrected.

The second part of the *Augsburg Confession* was largely in the nature of a commentary on the first. It took the form of seven statements based on the so-called *Torgau Articles*, compiled in March/April 1530, and represented the views of Luther, Melancthon, Johann Bugenhagen (a pastor who lived in Wittenberg) and Justus Jonas (Professor of Canon Law at Wittenberg University). The seven statements covered:

1. Communion in Bread Alone
2. Enforced Celibacy in the Priesthood
3. The Mass as an Expiatory Sacrifice
4. Compulsory Confession
5. Human Devices for Earning God's Grace
6. Abuses Within Monasticism
7. Improper Authority Claimed by Bishops

Six years after its appearance, this *Confession* was translated into English by Richard Taverner, and it had a very marked influence upon the later *Thirty-Nine Articles* of the Church of England. It set out in classical form the position of the Lutheran reformers, showing very clearly the extent to which they based their principles both on Scripture and on the wisdom of the early Fathers of the Church, but because it was intended to identify abuses within the Catholic Church as well as to provide an exposition of Lutheran convictions, to some extent it fell between two stools. It did not please the reformers further to the north of Germany, who regarded it as a compromise with Catholicism. They disliked the fact that it did not contain a single reference to the papacy, and they were also uneasy about its seeming ambiguity concerning the way in which Christ is presented in the Eucharist. It also appeared to them that not enough attention had been paid to the important Lutheran principle of the priesthood of all believers. Evidently it was thought that further elucidation was needed, and it was in Melancthon's *Apology for the Augsburg Confession*

(1531) that these problems were largely overcome, providing a much clearer theological exposition of what Lutheranism stood for, though the substance was still essentially the same. Prior to the publication of Melancthon's *Apology*, in July 1530 the four cities of Strasbourg, Lindau, Constance and Memmingen put together a revised Confession of their own, known as the *Confessio Tetrapolitana*. It leaned very heavily upon the *Augsburg Confession*, but displayed clear signs of having been affected by some of the teachings of Ulrich Zwingli.

### ***The Formula and the Book of Concord***

Two further documents need to be mentioned here, because they illustrate the way in which the Lutheran position was being worked out as the sixteenth century progressed. The *Formula of Concord* (1577), came into being as a result of certain differences of opinion between factions within Lutheranism. The leading figures were Jacob Andreae and Martin Chemnitz, both of whom were strongly opposed to the teachings of John Calvin, as well as to Catholicism. The document is very authoritarian and almost arrogant in tone, but it does provide a clear statement of mainstream Lutheranism as it stood at that particular point in time. It denies the doctrine of transubstantiation, and affirms that Christ is truly and fully present in the Eucharist – but only in the same sense as he is present in the world at large. It insists upon the total sinfulness of the human race after the “Fall”, but it rejects the hard-line Calvinistic teaching about predestination.

In 1580, three years after the publication of the *Formula of Concord*, there appeared in Dresden the much more substantial *Book of Concord*, which brought together a wide range of documents including the *Formula* itself, the three great Creeds of the Church (*Nicene*, *Apostles’* and *Athanasian*), and the *Augsburg Confession* (along with the later *Apology* and Luther's two *Catechisms*). It was hoped that this would serve to bring the various Lutheran parties together, and it was in that hope that the book was signed by more than eighty representatives of Lutheran churches and over eight thousand Lutheran pastors. Those figures in themselves are of no small significance in estimating its worth. But unfortunately the hopes were not fully realised. The *Book of Concord* found favour only within Germany, where it was adopted by fifty-one princes and thirty-five cities as the norm for their teaching, but in other countries, such as Denmark and Norway, it was rejected.

### ***Lutheran Protestantism – a summary***

So the main features of this evolving Protestantism can be summarised thus:

- Scripture is the sole authority for Christian life and belief, though the wisdom of the early Church fathers is also recognised.
- Human beings are saved by the sheer and undeserved Grace of God, freely given in and through Christ and attainable only by faith. Good

works are the fruits of that salvation, not the means of attaining it.

- The sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist are the means whereby God's grace is imparted, and are therefore to be understood as divine mysteries. The teaching that the bread of the Eucharist actually becomes the body of Christ through transubstantiation is denied, but the real presence of Christ in the elements is fully acknowledged; he co-exists with the bread and the wine, but he does not replace them.
- The priesthood does not belong to an élite few, but is shared by all Christians by virtue of their incorporation into the Body of Christ – the Church. The necessary celibacy of the clergy is denied.
- The Church is to be understood as a congregation of believing Christians, among whom Christ is truly present, and where the Gospel is faithfully and rightly preached and the sacraments are properly administered. No other agent or authority is needed to validate the Church.
- The State (i.e. the civil government) has been set in place by the will of God, and it is the duty of all Christians to obey the civil laws.

### ***Calvinistic Confessions of Faith***

The activities of John Calvin in Switzerland also resulted in the promulgation of a considerable number of statements of faith, though they have never played quite the same kind of role as those which emerged out of Lutheranism. This is partly due to the Calvinistic attitude towards the authority of the Scriptures, which relegated all such articles of faith to the position of subordinate standards. It also owes more than a little to the fact that Calvinism never produced anything to match the influence of the *Augsburg Confession* in Lutheranism. Nevertheless, there were certain writings which merit closer attention here.

### ***The Helvetic Confessions***

Two important Calvinistic (Reformed) documents can be taken together. The *First Helvetic Confession*, produced by the Swiss reformer Johann Bullinger, was compiled and published in 1536, in order to provide the Swiss reformed churches with an acceptable statement of a basis of faith. Because of Bullinger's own background it was very much in the nature of a composite work. He had immersed himself thoroughly in the writings of Luther, Melancthon and Zwingli (whom he succeeded as chief pastor in Zurich), and had collaborated closely with John Calvin. So we should not be surprised to find that this document embodies elements from all of those sources. It found favour among Swiss Protestants, but not in Strasbourg, largely because it made room for a serious treatment of the Zwinglian position, and because it was critical of Bucer's teachings, which were widely accepted in northern Germany. Bullinger's influence on the broader Reformation scene, including England, has only fairly recently come to be fully appreciated: Elizabeth I turned to him for advice on more than one occasion.

The *Second Helvetic Confession*, also the work of Bullinger, appeared thirty years later in 1566, this time at the request of Frederick the Pious of the German Palatinate, who had become a Calvinist. In some places this document is more like a theological dissertation than a confession of faith, and certainly it is one of the longest of all the documents of this kind to emerge out of the sixteenth century. It was more inclined towards Calvin than its forerunner, though once again it contained clearly-recognisable elements from the teachings of Ulrich Zwingli. This time it won the acceptance not only of all the Swiss Protestant churches, but also of many outside Switzerland altogether. Between the appearances of these two *Helvetic Confessions* we should also note the publication of John Calvin's *Geneva Catechism* of 1542, though this was not really a confession of faith as such, but rather a set of questions and answers embodying his own fundamental ideas.

### ***French Calvinism***

In France, the Reformed Church put together its own confession of faith at a General Synod held in St Germain in 1559. The original draft for this (the *Confessio Gallicana*) was written personally by none other than John Calvin, and one of its most notable characteristics was its elegant style and clarity of thought. Here, Calvin's doctrine of predestination is carefully explained. Two years later, the *Belgic Confession* was drawn up in the French language by Guy (Guido) de Bres, based again upon the *Confessio Gallicana*. It contained a powerful repudiation of Anabaptist teachings, in order to win the support of the Netherlands, and in this it certainly succeeded, because it was warmly welcomed there and adopted by a Synod in Antwerp in 1566.

In the middle of the sixteenth century the seaport of La Rochelle had become one of the main centres of Calvinism, having grown into a major maritime city, and during the so-called Wars of Religion it provided ships which preyed on all Catholic vessels within reach. It was in this city that Theodore Beza, Calvin's successor in Geneva, presided over an assembly of French Protestants in 1571 for the purpose of drawing up yet another confession of faith – once again in the Calvinist mould, though showing some signs of drifting back towards earlier Scholasticism. Beza, in fact, had already written an earlier confession of faith back in 1560 (the *Confession de la foi Chretienne*), not long after he took up his duties as Professor at Calvin's new Academy in Geneva.

### ***The Main Principles of Calvinism***

We can now attempt a summary of Calvinistic (Reformed) principles, to parallel our account of Lutheran teachings, though with the important reservation that during the sixteenth century there were already some very important differences of opinion emerging within these groups – most of them concerning the theology of the Eucharist. But we can describe Calvinism in general like this:

- God reigns supreme, prior to everything. He rules unconditionally, by

free grace. He is thus Lord, not only of the Church but also of civil states and governments, all of which are subject to him and his laws. The Church has been instituted by God to preach true doctrine and to administer the sacraments. The civil state has been set up by God to maintain law and order in a sinful world. The state is given the task of aiding the Church, and the Church is to advise and instruct the state in the law of God. There is no salvation outside the Church.

- Scripture is the sole arbiter in matters of belief and life. It contains God's law, both in the Old and the New Testaments. There can be no higher authority.
- Humanity is totally corrupt, the image of God having been destroyed in the Fall of Adam. Mankind cannot save itself, but it can be justified by faith alone, and not by works.
- Not everyone is to be saved. God has predestined some to salvation and others to damnation. No-one can earn, and equally no-one can deserve God's mercy. He alone determines who is to receive his divine grace.
- The true Church is made up of God's Elect – those who have been chosen by God. It is not a voluntary fellowship of believers. It is sustained primarily through the work of proclaiming the Gospel, which established the presence of God's living Word within the Church.
- The sacraments are divine mysteries, which God alone understands. The doctrine of transubstantiation is rejected. The bread and wine of the Eucharist enable true communion with Christ, but he is not literally present within the elements themselves. In Zwinglian teaching the elements act as symbols, pointing to the truth which lies outside and beyond them. They commemorate the death and resurrection of Christ.
- The ministry within the Church is not priestly in the Catholic sense. It is a ministry of leadership and service, through pastors who preach and administer the sacraments, doctors (or teachers) who provide instruction, elders who correct, guide and admonish, and deacons who deal with matters of organisation and business. All of these must be properly called and appointed to their offices, and are answerable to the authority of the congregation at large, among whom the will of God is most clearly discerned. There is no Scriptural warrant for celibacy as a necessary requirement for any kind of ministry.
- All this is not a departure from the traditions of the historic Church, but a return to them insofar as they are based upon the Scriptures.

So now, against this background of the Reformation as it progressed on the continent of Europe, we are in a position to look at the way in which England in particular was affected, and to ask about the extent to which the two sets of events were related.