

# Introduction to the Magdeburg Confession with an Appeal to The LC-MS

IDE Symposium: The Just War Doctrine

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May 20, 2016

## **I. Introduction and Historical Considerations**

The death of Martin Luther in 1546 came on the heels of the completion of Emperor Charles V's campaign against France in the west (1544) and the Turks in the east (1545).<sup>1</sup> With his forces not otherwise preoccupied, he entered into a tenuous agreement with Pope Paul III to wage war against the Protestants.<sup>2</sup> Thus the Holy Roman Emperor renewed his campaign against the Reformation, which he had begun at Augsburg, 20 years earlier. Upon the betrayal by Maurice of Saxony and the eventual defeat of the Schmalkaldic League in April of 1547, all obstacles seemed to be out of the way for Charles to have his German magistrates once again enforce papal rule over their subjects. So, on May 15<sup>th</sup> of 1548, the *Augsburg Interim* was imposed upon the German people. The *Interim* required Evangelical Churches to restore nearly all of the papal abuses that they had been freed from by the Reformation. Chief among these was the renunciation of the doctrine of justification by faith alone.<sup>3</sup>

Many Lutherans capitulated to the terms of the *Interim* in hopes of peace. Even Philip Melanchthon, writer of the Augsburg Confession, capitulated, taking with him those who are ever so affectionately called Philippists by the true Lutherans. But these true Lutherans, known as the Gnesio-Lutherans knew that man-made peace at the expense of the Gospel is no true peace. Thus, many Gnesio-Lutherans chose to be incarcerated and executed rather than renounce their faith and burden their consciences.<sup>4</sup> Others fled to the defensible city of Magdeburg.

Magdeburg, unlike many other Lutheran cities, was surrounded by formidable walls and was under the pastoral care of Nicholas von Amsdorff, close friend of Martin Luther. Notable Lutherans

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1 Wiliston Walker, Richard Norris, David Lotz, and Robert Handy, *A History of the Christian Church* (New York: Scribner, 1985), 462.

2 Matthew Colvin, trans, *The Magdeburg Confession* (North Charleston: Matthew Trehalla, 2012), xxx.

3 F. Bente, ed., *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis: CPH, 1921), 95-96.

4 Ibid, 96.

who fled to Magdeburg include Mathias Flacius Illyricus and Nicholas Gallus, both of whom were influential in the development of the Formula of Concord.<sup>5</sup>

The stage was set for Charles V to stomp out the Reformation in Germany. All that was necessary was for these theologians to recant or to be handed over to the Imperial forces.

These events precipitated a theological dilemma for the pastors at Magdeburg. Romans 13 requires the Christian to be a loyal subject to the governing authorities, but it is universally understood that this requirement does not have such jurisdiction as to force the Christian subject to sin against God. With the demands of the Interim including the renunciation of justification by faith alone, the Lutherans at Magdeburg could not in good conscience obey such an edict.

So, on April 13<sup>th</sup>, 1550, the Magdeburg Confession was published. Commonly ascribed to the pen of Amsdorff, the city's pastor, it was no doubt influenced by others such as Gallus and Flacius.<sup>6</sup> The title page reads as follows:

The Confession and Defense of the Pastors and Other Ministers of the Church of Magdeburg, 13<sup>th</sup> of April in the year 1550. Psalm 18, 'I spoke of your testimonies in the sight of kings, and was not put to shame.' Romans 13, 'Rulers are not a terror for good works, but for evil.' Acts 9, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goad.'<sup>7</sup>

## **II. Content of the Magdeburg Confession**

The Magdeburg Confession is constructed in three parts. The first part is a basic re-presentation of the articles of faith as outlined in Augustana. The second part is a doctrinal defense for the resistance of the lesser magistrates against higher authorities. Finally, the third part is an exhortation to all those who would aid Charles V in his war against the Evangelicals. This portion also includes a condemnation of all who would attempt to be bystanders and give no aid one way or the other. The Confession then concludes with Psalm 93.

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5 Nicholas Gallus and Mathias Flacius published a number of tracts opposing Osiander's erring position on justification. Osiander held that justification is not a forensic act, but a quality that is developed over a period of time. Mathias Flacius later wrote the Magdeburg Centuries in 1552. Flacius is revered for his defense of Lutheranism in the adiaphorist controversies, which led to Article X of the Formula. However his reputation is tarnished by the Flacian controversy over original sin. However, it was zeal for the truth against the Pelagians that led him to his erring conclusion that original sin is a substance. Flacius failed to recognize that such a definition makes God the originator of sin. For more on this topic, see F. Bente, ed., *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis: 1921), 95-96.

6 Interestingly, though Flacius was present in the city for the publication of the Confession, he did not sign it. Perhaps owing to his views on original sin, Flacius might have preferred a stronger description of original sin than is given in chapter 2 of the Confession.

7 Colvin, 1.

## Preface

The Magdeburg Confession is a clear attempt to rally all those who would have rallied to Luther were he still in the Church militant. The Preface begins:

There can be no doubt that God by his great kindness raised up Dr. Martin Luther as a third Elijah, in order that he might reveal in these last days (according to His published prophecies) the Man of Sin, the Son of Perdition, the Antichrist, ruling in Rome in the Temple of God; likewise, to destroy him by the spirit of the mouth of Christ, and to rebuild the entire doctrine of His Son.<sup>8</sup>

The writers of the Confession see their cause as identical to that of Luther's. In appealing to Luther as a "third Elijah," the writers are implying an eschatological urgency to all who would read the Confession.

A brief history is then given in the Preface that outlines how the present plight of the Evangelical Church came to be. Amsdorff refers to the events of the Diet of Augsburg "that took place 20 years ago" and writes a marginal note referring the reader also to Luther's *Warning to his Dear German People*.<sup>9</sup> He then describes the events leading to Augsburg Interim of 1548.

The Preface goes on to condemn all those who think that capitulating to Rome allows for continued acceptance of the faith confessed at Augsburg. Here follows the self-stated reason for writing the Confession:

Since our magistrates and the church of this city are among [those vestiges who retain the Augsburg Confession], to the point that our enemies themselves profess to be assailing the remnants of this confession among us, we judge that it is part of our duty, since by the kindness of God we seem to be singled out from the whole church to have a voice that is still free, that we publicly put forth something to vindicate in some way the revealed doctrine of the Gospel from this unjust oppression.<sup>10</sup>

The Preface goes on to outline the contents of the Confession. The point is made that the Augsburg Confession is to be accepted and the subsequent doctrinal proofs are intended to be merely a repetition rather than a reworking of the Confession presented to Emperor Charles V at Augsburg.

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8 Colvin, 3.

9 Ibid., 4.

10 Colvin, 6.

Explicit condemnation is made of the doctrine of the papists, Interimists, Adiaphorists, Anabaptists, Sacramentarians, and similar fanatics. The core of the Confession is described as follows.

... we shall prove that the preservation of this doctrine is necessary for a godly magistrate, and that the dissent of a godly magistrate is just, even against a superior one who is using arms to force the rightly instituted churches of Christ to defect from the acknowledged truth and turn to idolatry.<sup>11</sup>

The writers of the Confession intend to defend the use of arms by a lesser magistrate against a superior one. The final section is described as a warning to all true Christians to not only refuse aid to the Emperor, but to oppose him lest they lose their own health and salvation.

### **The First Chief Part: The Principal Articles of Christian Doctrine**

The first chief part of the Confession merely repeats the teaching of Augustana. This repetition is notable in that it explicitly states the doctrines that are lost by the Augsburg Interim. But more pertinent to the rest of the Confession are the final two chapters which detail the differences between the Two Kingdoms. Chapter 6 defines the authority, power, and scope of the reign God gives to the ecclesiastical authorities. Chapter 7 defines the authority, power, and scope given to earthly rulers. A clear distinction is made that limits the authority of each to their proper roles.

It seems that the signers of the Magdeburg Confession saw this work as the complementary document to the Augsburg Confession. There in Augsburg was written a Confession signed by earthly magistrates correcting the false doctrines foisted on the German people by the religious leaders in Rome. Here in Magdeburg is a Confession signed by ministers correcting the over reaching policies of the superior magistrates of the Empire.

Chapter 6, concerning the Church, defines the soteriological purpose of the Church in similar language to Augustana Article V. Here is also defined the authority of the bishops as presented in Augustana Article XXVIII. The focus of this chapter is primarily to define the authority and office of the keys so that a clear understanding of the Church might be presented. This definition is as follows:

Moreover, the power of the keys is the power to teach the Word of God, to administer the sacraments, to loose and bind the sins of individuals or groups of men, to call ministers, to hear and adjudicate questions of religion, to devise traditions that aid the ministry

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 7.

instituted by Christ – the keys bring with them the power to do all and each of these things, but in such a way that they all be done, not by human judgment and decision, but according to the command of the Word of God, for the edification of the Church, not for its destruction, for the living only, and not for the dead.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, chapter 7 prepares the reader for the substance of the theological defense of resistance by a godly ruler against a superior magistrate. The Confession sets the earthly magistrates in contradistinction to the Church while pointing out that both, as ordinances of God, have the same teleological purpose, though each has its own means to accomplish that end. The writers are appealing to the Emperor that he recognize them as fellow Christians who intend the same goal of the true knowledge and glory of God. But in the end, the writers acknowledge that if this is impossible, as in the case of a Caesar of a differing religion, then Caesar is still bound by natural law to allow for peaceable living, which results in civic righteousness.

And [God] has distinguished one power from another in His Word, so that He has attributed to each of them its own object and task, and likewise to each its own method of punishment. And although He does not desire the powers to be mixed up with each other, nonetheless He desires them to help each other in turn, so that in the end they all may agree, and that everything in its own place and way principally may promote the true knowledge of God and His Glory and their eternal salvation, or, when it does not attain this ultimate goal, may at least bring about a secondary sort of well-being, that men may live peacefully, uprightly, και ουκ ακαρτοι in this civil manner of life.<sup>13</sup>

Thus the Confession defines the limits of government to the rewarding of righteousness and the punishment of evildoers.

### **The Second Chief Part: Concerning Resistance**

Now the focus is placed upon resistance proper. Having outlined and defined the rule and limitation of both the Church and the State, the Confession goes on to say that the abandonment of such rule and limitation necessitates action on the part of the lesser magistrates. The superior magistrates were attempting to force false worship on the Lutherans and threatened death to those who would not submit to their yoke. This is likened by the Confession to Christ's prediction that, "They will put you

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12 Colvin, 38-39.

13 Colvin, 41.

out of the synagogues,’ and ‘the hour is coming when everyone who kills you will think that he is offering an act of worship to God.’” (John 16)<sup>14</sup>

The Confession is careful to state that if Caesar would only allow them the same courtesy that he offers the Jew and the Mohammedan, then the Lutherans would make the best citizens.

For we teach with the apostle Paul that you are the vicarious minister of God for promoting good works, and that obedience is owed to you in this role, just as to God, not only because of wrath or fear of your sword, but also because of conscience, that is, fear of the wrath and judgment of God.<sup>15</sup>

And again:

We command them, by the word of Christ, to render unto God the things that are God’s and to Caesar, though he be different in religion, the things that are Caesar’s. They render these duties of double obedience and conduct themselves without crime of their consciences on either side, and without rancor, when both sides keep themselves within the limits of their duty prescribed by God and by the laws.<sup>16</sup>

By pointing these things out, the writers of the Confession are making a clear distinction between themselves and those radical reformers of Mühlhausen such as Thomas Müntzer.<sup>17</sup> The Confession takes pains to say that the current resistance was necessitated, not by their own disagreement with Caesar, but by his own insistence on bloodshed.

The final point made in the preface to the second chief part is that this doctrine of resistance by a lesser magistrate is one that the Magdeburg pastors would have preferred to keep hidden. They acknowledge that such a public proclamation of this teaching may result in others abusing it as a justification to take up the sword against a superior magistrate when less violent means may be sought. Nevertheless, the current threat of extinction to the Gospel impels the pastors of Magdeburg to publish the teaching.

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14 Colvin, 51

15 Ibid 52.

16 Ibid

17 Thomas Müntzer led the peasants to revolt in April of 1525 because of his enthusiastic views of the establishment of God’s Kingdom on earth. He was summarily executed as an insurrectionist in May of 1525. What is interesting here is that Thomas Müntzer saw himself as a modern day Matathias, referring to the leader of the Maccabees in the intertestamental period. Matathias freed the consciences of those who would take up arms to defend the Jewish people when attacked on a Sabbath. Matathias is exemplary more for the Magdeburgers than for Müntzer. For further discussion, see David Mark Whitford, *Tyranny and Resistance: the Magdeburg Confession and the Lutheran Tradition* (St. Louis: CPH, 2001).

The just resistance of a lesser magistrate is then defended by three arguments. The first argument is made from the definition of the magistrates given in Romans 13. The second argument is made by an exposition of Christ's statement, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." (Matthew 22:21) The third argument is made from history in which God resists tyrants by means of other magistrates.

### **The First Argument: Romans 13**

This first argument made from the definition of the magistrate given in Romans 13 is the clearest and best argument. In the first argument, the Confession gives the definition of a magistrate and likewise, the definition of a tyrant. A tyrant is a magistrate who does not do as prescribed in Romans 13. But the term tyrant is not used lightly and is broken into four categories with four corresponding responses.

The first level of tyranny is the injury done by a magistrate due to his own vices, as in adultery or other illicit activity. This level of tyranny is likened to the drunkenness of Noah, and the actions of Shem and Japheth are commended as exemplary. For such a tyrant who causes injury by his own lifestyle, the lesser magistrates may respectfully urge him to amend his living, but they should otherwise "cover their father's nakedness."

The second level of tyranny is when a magistrate unjustly bears the sword against an individual or a small group of people. Action against such tyranny is commended to the individual conscience of the other magistrates to resist as they deem they must. However, they are also urged to suffer even the loss of life and to leave vengeance to God if this can be done without sin.

The third level of tyranny is the compulsion of a lesser magistrate by a superior to engage in sin. In such instances, caution is advised that the resistance of such compulsion would not lead to further sin. And in such cases, the lesser magistrate is urged to be accurate and true in his judgment of the tyranny lest he become a tyrant himself.

The fourth and final level of tyranny is the persecution by "guile and arms" that force subjects to abandon good works and resort to evil. Here the Confession states that such a magistrate has ceased to be an ordinance of God and has become an ordinance of the Devil.<sup>18</sup> This final stage of tyranny is cautioned against in such a way that the right to resistance is now considered an obligation.

Therefore, if now the leader or Caesar proceeds to such a height of insanity only in that order of natural knowledge which governs the society of civil life and uprightness, that

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18 Colvin, 58-59.

he abolishes the law concerning marriages and all chastity, and himself sets up a contrary law of roving unclean lusts, to the effect that the wives and daughters of all men are to be prostituted; and if he himself defends and prosecutes this law with force and arms, so that certain death is laid down as the penalty for those who resist or fail to conform – in such a case, doubtless, no clear-thinking person would have any hesitation about the *divine right* and *commandment* that such a leader or monarch ought to be curbed by everyone in his most wicked attempt, even by the lowest of the lowest magistrates with whatever power they have. (emphasis mine)<sup>19</sup>

The Confession goes on to say that worse than even such forced physical prostitution is the forced spiritual prostitution that would be done if the Interim were not opposed.

### **The Second Argument: Matthew 22**

The second argument is made by distinguishing that which is owed to Caesar from that which is owed to God. Taking their cue from Luther's Small Catechism meanings for the 10 Commandments, the pastors of Magdeburg state that the inference can be made that giving to Caesar what is Caesar's means to not give him what is owed to God. Likewise, the inference is that which belongs to others is not to be given to Caesar. "If, contrary to these laws, Caesar should demand my life or some other man's life, or the chastity of a wife or daughter, or property, etc., I ought not allow them to him."<sup>20</sup>

Finally, the point is made that when Caesar demands by threat of death that which does not belong to him, the subject is also to deprive Caesar of those things to which he would have had rights.

Let us take an example concerning a father of a family. If he should come to his wife or grown daughters in his house with some scoundrels in an obvious attempt to prostitute them, then they, his wife and daughters, not only would not render their husband and father the obedience which they otherwise owe him, but when they are not able to preserve their chastity in any other way, they would drive him off with stones.<sup>21</sup>

The connection is made, again, between physical prostitution of such a vile father with the spiritual prostitution of a tyrannical Caesar.

Finally, the second argument takes Christ's statement to mean that God is owed all things. Caesar himself is subject to God. Therefore, Caesar should render to God what is God's and not take it for himself. This argument is made principally to a Christian magistrate, especially the highest Prince,

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19 Ibid., 60

20 Colvin 63.

21 Ibid., 64.



namely the Holy Roman Emperor. However, it is assumed that this be the case even in those situations where Caesar is not a godly man.

### **The Third Argument: History**

The argument from history is careful to first instruct that God does not will evil. Therefore He does not want evil leaders to be followed in *all* things, only those things which can be done without sin. If subjects owe complete obedience to their magistrates, even to sin by his command, then God would contradict Himself. So, God opposes magistrates that lead their subjects to abandon Him and sin.

Nowhere in the Confession are subjects urged to take up the sword against their magistrates. Rather, care is taken to say that magistrates are the proper tool which God uses to restrain the evil of other magistrates. This includes the lesser magistrates restraining the evil of a superior.

Then follows a number of examples from history in which God opposed the tyranny of an unjust magistrate by means of lesser magistrates.<sup>22</sup> Antiochus was opposed by Matathias and the Maccabees (1 Maccabees 2), Jehu took up the sword against King Joram (2 Kings 9), the people defend Jonathan from death by his own father, Saul (1 Samuel 14), Asa removed his mother's idolatry from the land (1 Kings 15), Ambrose opposed Theodosius (Tripartite History, book 9), the Armenian Christians opposed Emperor Maximus, Emperor Constantine opposed co-emperor Licinius (Eusebius, *Church History*, book 9), and finally, Trajan tells his Master of the Horse, "Use this sword against my enemies if I give righteous commands; but if I give unrighteous commands, use it against me."<sup>23</sup>

Thus the pastors at Magdeburg look to the history of the Church and even to naturally revealed law to see evidences for such restraining of a tyrannical magistrate by a lesser magistrate.

### **The Third Chief Part: The Exhortation**

The final chief part includes the most vitriolic remarks towards those who lend aid to the Emperor in his campaign against the Evangelical Church. If a preacher were to look for examples of preaching the 5<sup>th</sup> commandment, he should look first to the Large Catechism, then to the Magdeburg Confession.

The language of the Small Catechism is echoed throughout this portion. Not only is it sin in taking up the sword against the Lutherans at Magdeburg, it is equally a sin to stand by and do nothing. There is nothing but the harshest condemnation of all those fence-sitters who likely intended to watch

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22 Noticeably lacking, in the author's opinion, is the interposition of Frederick the Wise when he had Luther kidnapped. Considering Amsdorff's involvement in that event, it is curious that this is not mentioned in the Confession.

23 Examples taken from Confession, Colvin, 71-72.

and see the outcome of the Emperor's campaign before they committed one way or the other. The Interimists are warned that by refusing to retract their subscription to the Augsburg Interim, they become partakers in the crucifixion of Christ's body at Magdeburg. A call to repentance is strung throughout the exhortation that any who had forgotten their former love would return to Christ and His doctrinally pure Church.

If any men, with Peter, knowingly deny [sc. Christ] by way of weakness, or unknowingly persecute Him with Paul, we pray for them, that God may grant them repentance like that of Peter and Paul...

And those who die in this run-up to war, or who shall die later in the actual conflicts, shall they not die as persecutors of Christ? How then will they be able to hope for forgiveness from Him whom they are persecuting, or to excuse their deed or deny that they have persecuted Christ in this war, since conscience itself then will rightly warn them?<sup>24</sup>

The various excuses of those who do not lend aid to the Lutherans in Magdeburg are then considered and refuted. Finally, this condemning statement is made:

God knows the emptiness of these reasons and whatever others they are able to think up now, and He proves in the consciences of individuals that they are not able to fool God, but will pay Him the penalties for this abandonment. Therefore this doctrine is an exposition of the fifth commandment, which makes guilty of murder not only those who take away life unjustly, but also those who do not rescue, as much as they can, either their own or others' lives from unjust violence.<sup>25</sup>

Then is given the duties of all those who would be Christian and know of the plight of the Christians at Magdeburg. First, prayer is to be made to God; second, supplications are to be made to superiors that they cease and desist their crimes; third, when such supplications are ignored, equal and compensatory force is to be used against those superiors who are persecuting the Church.

Finally, the inaction of those who are afraid of losing their lives is roundly condemned.

Gentile men, who knew nothing certain about God, or about the immortality of the soul and eternal life, often submitted to death far more bravely on account of political causes, than we Christians – ah, shame! – do for the true religion of Christ. Oh what delicate Martyrs we are, not to say Epicurean bellies.

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24 Colvin, 76.

25 Ibid., 81.

Therefore let each of us do his duty with a brave heart in this most holy resolution to preserve the true religion – teachers by teaching, magistrates by bearing the sword, subjects by promptly obeying their governors when they command pious acts.<sup>26</sup>

And so the onlookers to the events at Magdeburg are called on to work together for the body of Christ as each is called by God to do.

The Magdeburg Confession concludes with Psalm 93 in which God is described as sitting on His throne and is revealed by the punishment of wickedness through the flood. This is likely a reminder to the papist and the Interimist alike of how God punishes wickedness and preserves His Church, even though she be small in number.

### **III. Conclusion**

The result of the Magdeburg Confession is that we now have a document which gives a Lutheran perspective on just resistance against a tyrannical ruler. In an age where freedom of speech is being redefined and the “free exercise of religion” is replaced by “freedom of worship,” it behooves the Lutheran pastor to become acquainted with the reasoning of such resistance. But the warning remains that we should study this teaching carefully lest it be abused or misappropriated to a context in which it does not belong. There is a strong temptation to jump to conclusions regarding the current day political climate in America, but careful study should always precede any such confession as is done by the pastors in Magdeburg. They did not come to the writing task lightly.

True though this opinion about defense is, we do not put it forth with any pleasure, especially because we think that many wicked men in the external society of the Church can seek to make this pious reason a pretext for some impious attempt of their own, and also that even good men are sometimes carnally impatient of injuries, and can badly abuse opinions that have been rightly handed down to them by employing them at the wrong time or place. For this very reason, we know that the greatest theologians before us were especially cautious, hesitant, and careful in setting forth this opinion, since it was not yet necessary nor beneficial for every curious inquirer to know.<sup>27</sup>

That being said, we should not therefore remain silent as tyrannical policies begin to formulate and burden the consciences of believers. Such examples as the HHS mandate, the Congressional attempt to force our daughters to register for a draft, and most recently, the attempt by the current

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<sup>26</sup> Colvin, 85.

<sup>27</sup> Colvin, 53.

administration to enforce trans gender use of restrooms, showers, and sleeping accommodations for all public schools ought to urge us on towards a clear definition of resistance in our day.

The exhortation that concludes the Magdeburg Confession is taken today as well as it was then. When we know that gross injustices are being perpetuated by the highest Prince of the land, we are no less guilty than he if we fail to give aid to our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ who are beset by such assaults on their consciences. Just as the magistrates defended their pastors' lives at Augsburg, and as the pastors defended their magistrates' consciences at Magdeburg, so too ought we, the visible Church in the United States, speak up in defense of the lives and consciences of our citizens. We must educate ourselves on this doctrine so that we can inform our own magistrates on their God-given vocations in such a time as this.