

The Augsburg Confession

Article 17

Agreement

This was one article where the Lutherans and the Romanists were in agreement. There was nothing which was in dispute in this article. In the Confutation the Romanists responded: *“The confession of the seventeenth article is received, since from the Apostles’ Creed and the Holy Scripture the entire Catholic Church knows that Christ will come at the last day to judge the quick and the dead.”*

So one might ask, “Why was it necessary to include this article, if there was nothing to discuss?” The reason for its inclusion was the fact that errors concerning the Lord’s return were once again becoming prevalent, and the Lutherans were being blamed for these errors. They had to make it clear that this was a teaching that the Lutheran churches were not supporting, encouraging or propagating. With this article the Lutherans distinguished themselves from the other so-called “Reformed” churches by condemning their teaching as heretical.

Article XVII

The Lutherans state: *It is also taught among us that our Lord Jesus Christ will return on the last day for judgment and will raise up all the dead, to give eternal life and everlasting joy to believers and the elect but to condemn ungodly men and the devil to hell and eternal punishment.*

Rejected, therefore, are the Anabaptists who teach that the devil and condemned men will not suffer eternal pain and torment.

Rejected, too, are certain Jewish opinions which are even now making an appearance and which teach that, before the resurrection of the dead, saints and godly men will possess a worldly kingdom and annihilate all the godless.

Note: The word “eschatology” is regularly used in connection with the study of events surrounding Christ’s return. “Eschatology” is a fitting word to use in this regard since it comes from the Greek and means “a study of the last things.”

Of the Return of Christ for Judgment

Eschatological errors tend to be a consistent mark of religious sects. A study of Church History (past and present) demonstrates this. Errors concerning Christ’s return manifest themselves in two ways as noted here in the Augsburg Confession. The first is known as annihilationism and the other millennialism. Both are very dangerous teachings which lead to a false view of Christ’s work. Annihilationism destroys the importance of Christ’s work, while millennialism changes Christ’s purpose into something it is not.

Annihilationism

Annihilationism teaches either 1) that hell does not exist, or 2) those who go to hell will only suffer for a short time. This term comes from the teaching that unbelievers will be annihilated on the last day and will simply cease to exist. This teaching is based on the premise that God is a God of love and could never condemn any of His own creatures to everlasting punishment.

The teaching of annihilationism belittles the very real judgment of hell to make people feel more comfortable with living a life of sin while here on earth. At times the law must be proclaimed in its full fury to make sinners realize just how dangerous sin is. There are many passages in the Bible which clearly show that the punishment in hell will be without end for those who do not trust in Jesus as their Savior from sin (this concept is found in both the Old and New Testaments).

Scripture says that unbelievers will suffer **“eternal condemnation”** (Mark 3:29), **“everlasting destruction”** (2 Thessalonians 1:5-10), **“everlasting punishment”** (Matthew 25:46), and **“shame and everlasting contempt”** (Daniel 12:1-2). Also in the Old Testament the prophet Isaiah says: **“And they shall go forth and look Upon the corpses of the men Who have transgressed against Me. For their worm does not die, And their fire is not quenched. They shall be an abhorrence to all flesh”** (Isaiah 66:24 - c.f. Mark 9:43-45). And in the book of Revelation we read this description of hell: **“He himself shall also drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out full strength into the cup of His indignation. He shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of**

the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever; and they have no rest day or night, who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name” (Revelation 14:10-11).

Throughout Scripture the eternal punishment in hell is contrasted to the eternal joy in heaven. After the resurrection, the reunited body and soul will go to one of two places - either heaven or hell for eternity! This is what makes Christ's work for us so important!

Matthew 10:28 is sometimes used as a “proof passage” by annihilationists. ***“And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.”*** It is important to note the meaning of the Greek word that is translated “destroy” here. This same word is used by Peter to describe the destruction of the world during the flood (2 Peter 3:6). Vine says: “the idea is not of extinction, but ruin, loss, not of being, but of well being.”

Millennialism

Millennialism takes its name from the “thousand years” of Revelation 20:1-10, and teaches that Christ will establish an earthly kingdom for 1,000 years at some point in the future. It is interesting to note that the Lutherans call this teaching a “Jewish opinion”. Millennialism stems from the prevalent Jewish belief that the Messiah would return to establish a kingdom here in this world (this pre-dates the time of Christ). This was a perversion of the Old Testament promises for spiritual deliverance into a fleshly hope for a worldly kingdom. Millennialism rejects the idea that Old Testament prophecies which speak of the Kingdom of Christ refer to the New Testament Church and reinterpret these passages to refer to the reestablishment of a worldly kingdom of Israel (this is one of the reasons that we find such a preoccupation with the State of Israel in our world today).

Millennialism can be divided up into four main categories: Amillennialism, Postmillennialism, Premillennialism, and Dispensationalism (see the Diagram of Millennial Views).

We must be aware of this teaching and have a keen eye to look for it. Millennialism can be found permeating “secular” books like the “Left Behind” series, but is also common in

most of the “Study Bibles” on the shelves of Christian Bible Bookstores today. Beware of the notes in Study Bibles!

Millennialism is the result of not trusting in the power of the Means of Grace (Word and Sacraments) to bring about the growth of Christ’s Church here on earth. This can also be seen in the overwhelming desire to see visible growth in the church through other means. One will readily note the emphasis on the Church Growth Movement in millennialist churches.

Summary

When we began this study the question was asked: “Is the Augsburg Confession a stale document or does it still have practical application to us today?” As we have seen time and time again the truths stated in these articles are just as beneficial and applicable now as the day when they were first presented. This is demonstrated once again in Article 17. Not only was this topic misunderstood by many in the time of Luther, but it is increasingly confused by many more in our own time. From annihilationism to millennialism the errors of the past continue to be perpetuated even today. May the LORD continue to preserve the truth of His Word – in our midst and in our teaching! Amen.