



Reformation Reflections

WITNESS

When called to give “a reason for the hope that is within you,” (1 Peter 3:15) what do you say?

Martin Luther, standing alone before Emperor Charles V at Worms in 1521 said, “Here I stand, I can do no other. God help me.” George, margrave of Brandenburg, standing with the other Lutheran princes before the same Charles V, this time in Augsburg in 1530, declared:

“Before I let anyone take from me the Word of God and ask me to deny my God, I will kneel and let him strike off my head.”

The year is now 1537 and a new occasion to give witness to the faith has arisen for the Lutherans. The previous summer, Pope Paul III finally called for a general council of the Church to be held in Mantua, Italy, in the spring.



“To go or not to go” is the question on the minds of the reformers and their princes. Of course, the Pope didn’t help matters when he declared in September of 1536 that the purpose of the council was “the utter extirpation of the poisonous, pestilential Lutheran heresy.” So much for a free and open council.

Regardless, a skeptical Elector John Frederick of Saxony commissions an equally skeptical Luther to write up a list of articles of those things “which we cannot yield without becoming guilty of treason against God, even though property and life, peace or war, are at stake.”

The plan is for the Elector to present these articles to a meeting of allied Lutheran territories in February in Schmalkalden, Germany. A curious thing happened, though, between the commissioning of the articles and the delivery of them. Luther became ill—so ill, in fact, that he believed he was dying. As a result, he looked upon the articles he was writing as his last will and testament.

As he would write in the preface to the Smalcald Articles (as they came to be known) when they were finally published in 1538: “**I wanted to do this so that those who live and remain after me will have my testimony and confession to present, ... I have held fast to this confession until now and, by God’s grace, I will continue to hold to it.**”

The Elector did present them on February 8th but, as he and Luther suspected, the council did not take place. In fact, it would be another eight years (1545) before a council would be convened—this time in Trento, Italy—less than a year before Luther died.



The Smalcald Articles would go on to have a tremendous effect on the movement Luther left behind, eventually being included in the 1580 Book of Concord. Elector John Frederick appreciated them so much that, as he was approaching his death in 1554, he ordered them attached to his own last will and testament.

Giving witness to our faith as part of a will is just as wonderful an idea now as it was way back then. You can even make it far shorter than Luther’s 60 or so pages. Here’s a sample preamble for a will published today by organizations such as LWML and LCEF:

First, realizing the uncertainty of this life, I place full confidence and trust in my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who promised: “I am the resurrection and the life; he that believeth in Me, though he were dead yet shall he live; and whosoever believeth in Me shall never die.” (John 11:25-26).

Second, knowing that the wages of sin is death, I believe that Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, suffered and died for me, for the forgiveness of all my sins, which I neither deserve nor merit, but receive as a free gift of God, who is rich in grace and mercy.

Third, I urge my heirs not to set their hopes on uncertain riches, but to take hold of the life which is indeed through faith in Jesus Christ.



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