

The Second Helvetic Confession November, 2007

The Scots Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Second Helvetic Confession are all Reformation era statements of faith. They all followed within a generation of Martin Luther's posting of the 95 Theses on the Wittenburg Door on October 31, 1517. They each demonstrate how the new movement in the church was developing simultaneously throughout Europe. Each represents the area from which it originated: the Scots Confession, from Scotland; the Heidelberg Catechism, from Germany; and the Second Helvetic Confession, from Switzerland.

The Second Helvetic Confession was written as a defense document for a heresy trial. Frederick the Elector, who had ordered the preparation of the Heidelberg Catechism (see September's *Celtic* article) was under attack by Lutherans who objected to the Reformed emphasis of Catechism. Frederick was a governor, not a theologian. He turned to a friend, Heinrich Bullinger, to prepare a defense against the charge of heresy. The (successful) defense Bullinger constructed for Frederick later became the Second Helvetic Confession.

It is a long statement. It has thirty chapters and two hundred fifty six sections.

The Authority of Scripture

Structurally, the Second Helvetic Confession begins with the authority of Scripture. And, just so you are aware,

THE PREACHING OF THE WORD OF GOD IS THE WORD OF GOD. Wherefore when this Word of God is now preached in the church by preachers lawfully called, we believe that the very Word of God is proclaimed, and received by the faithful; and that neither any other Word of God is to be invented nor is to be expected from heaven: and that now the Word itself which is preached is to be regarded, not the minister that preaches; for even if he be evil and a sinner, nevertheless the Word of God remains still true and good.

The Word preached is to be regarded, not the preacher. It is why I say, "Praise God," when people are moved by a sermon. It explains why I often have a different experience of the sermon than you do. There are sermons that I love that get no reaction and, on the other hand, there are sermons that I struggle through that generate tremendous reaction. I *feel* my performance, you *hear* the Word. The more it is about me, the

less it is about the Word; the more it is about the Word, the less you see me.

After the authority of Scripture, the Confession moves into an extended discussion of God: unity and trinity; of images and idols; of worship through Jesus Christ; of God's providence. Then, it changes focus and looks at humans: original sin, free will and predestination. The work, life, and import of Jesus Christ follows. Then, the Church, sacraments, worship, education, and discipline round out the subjects covered.

"Guided" by the Confessions

This confession is a good illustration of how statements are a reflection of the time in which they were created. It is why we are "guided" by the Confessions rather than being "bound" by them.

Bullinger followed in Ulrich Zwingli's pulpit; Zwingli was known as a "Scripture-only" theologian. In other words, for Zwingli, if something was not specifically given, provided, or allowed in Scripture, it was prohibited. Zwingli rejected artistic works and most musical instrumentation. The thought was that a sterile environment was necessary to focus the worshiper's full attention on God. You see this expressed in the Second Helvetic Confession, "[A]ll luxurious attire, all pride, and everything unbecoming to Christian humility, discipline and modesty, are to be banished from the sanctuaries and places of prayer of Christians. For the true ornamentation of churches does not consist in ivory, gold, and precious stones, but in the frugality, piety and virtues of those who are in the Church. Let all things be done decently and in order in the church, and finally, let all things be done for edification."

Zwingli's was the extreme reaction against art and music (reflected in Bullinger's work) was a theological reaction against the abuses they had witnessed in the Roman Catholic Church. Most people remember that criticism of "indulgences" - paying priests to pray for loved ones so that they would be sprung from Purgatory - was the tipping point for the Reformation; many people do not remember that indulgences were a fundraiser for the construction costs of the highly ornate Vatican.

What about us? We do have stained glass windows and we do have art and we do have musical instruments. Do we not take the

Second Helvetic Confession seriously? Yes, we do. We are "guided" by it, not "bound" by it.

We recognize the abuses that led to the development of these statements about art and music. However, we also note that Scripture includes places for the development and use of art and music in worship. In Exodus 25-35 is an extended description of the gifts of the people that were to be collected in order to build the tabernacle as well as its design and special objects to go in it. The Temple had significant items and decoration. In the New Testament, Jesus specifically praises the woman who anoints him with an expensive perfume (John 12). When we applaud music in church, it is a way of saying, "Amen," or "Lord, we lift this worship to you as our own."

As we go through the *Book of Confessions*, I hope you are encouraged to begin thinking about, "What would I tell others about who God is and how God has met me in my life?"