

Lecture 2

Topic: The Schmalkaldic League and the Magdeburg Confession

Due: Gonzalez, 2.105–113

One example of a solid argument for genuine Christian resistance is the document called *The Magdeburg Confession* or the Doctrine of the Lesser Magistrate.

Background

1. The Protestant Reformation began in 1517 when Martin Luther, a Roman Catholic monk, nailed 95 debating points on the door of the church in the town of Wittenberg, Germany, where he lived. This was the local bulletin board and he was calling for a public debate on these issues. The most fundamental was how a person became righteous before God, was it through the work based sacraments of the church or was it through faith alone in Christ.

This began a break within the Roman church known as the Protestant Reformation, it was a protest against Roman theology, specifically the sale of indulgences, but this soon morphed into a realization that a person could not merit salvation or earn the merits for salvation, salvation was a gracious gift of God. . It was not Luther's intent at the beginning to create a break with Rome or with government. But the Pope didn't like it and reacted rather poorly.

At the core of Luther's theology was a theology of conscience. According to Metaxas, it wasn't the self-centered, self-absorbed conscience that modern man has in mind, but the storehouse of norms and standards which a person was answerable to God for. And so for a government or ecclesiastical entity to insert itself into the chain of command between God and the individual looking at his biblical responsibilities was a serious matter.

Magdeburg was a much larger city in Germany, in fact the Bishop there had Wittenberg in his diocese

2. In 1521 Charles V, the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, which controlled most of Europe, issued a decree on May 25, 1521, called the Edict of Worms declared in part:

For this reason we forbid anyone from this time forward to dare, either by words or by deeds, to receive, defend, sustain, or favor the said Martin Luther. On the contrary, we want him to be apprehended and punished as a notorious heretic, as he deserves, to be brought personally before us, or to be securely guarded until those who have captured him inform us, whereupon we will order the appropriate manner of proceeding against the said Luther. Those who will help in his capture will be rewarded generously for their good work.

This threatened the eternal destiny of anyone who helped him. As we have seen, Luther was saved because the prince of the region where he lived, Saxony, was the Elector Prince Frederick III, called the wise.

3. At risk to his own eternal destiny and his mortal life, the political leader over Luther, interposed himself between Luther his subject and Charles V his emperor.

This is one example of what has come to be called **the Doctrine of the Lesser Magistrates**

Defined. When a higher authority enacts an unjust law, then a lower authority has the right and the responsibility to interpose himself between the higher authority and the citizen to protect the citizen from an unjust law.

Frederick III's act of defiance saved Luther's life

4. Charles was never able to enforce the Edict of Worms. A large number of German princes followed Frederick's example. To end this conflict, The Diet of Augsburg was held in 1530, which was intended to bring peace between the RC and Protestant Factions

In 1530 after a meeting of the princes in the HRE at Augsburg German to attempt to unify Christianity in light of the threat from an Islamic invasion, a uneasy peace resulted. But fearing Charles might use military force to impose the Edict of Worms Luther wrote a *Warning to his Dear German People* which was published in 1531 and **contained three parts. The Magdeburg Confession was modeled after Luther's Warning, also containing three parts.**

5. An alliance of city states and duchy's was formed in 1531 by Prince Phillip of Hesse and Pince John Frederick I of Saxony, two of the most powerful rulers in German. The alliance was a defensive religious alliance so that these territories could ally themselves against any attacks from Charles V.

For 15 years Charles V did nothing.

6. 1546 Luther died. In June, 1546, 4 months after Luther died, Charles V and Pope Paul III entered into an agreement to shut down the spread of the Reformation.

In the name of God and with the help and assistance of his Papal Holiness, his Imperial Majesty should prepare himself for war, and equip himself with soldiers and everything pertaining to warfare against those who objected to the Council [of Trent], against the Smalcaldic League, and against all who were addicted to the false belief and error in Germany, and that he do so with all his power and might, in order to bring them back to the old faith and to the obedience of the Holy See.¹

7. On July 4, 1546, the leaders of the Schmalkaldic League brought their armies together to make a pre-emptive strike against Charles V.

¹ Pastors of Magdeburg. The Magdeburg Confession: 13th of April 1550 AD . Createspace Publishing. Kindle Edition.

But their attempt was thwarted when Maurice, Duke of Saxony, suddenly switched sides, bribed by Charles with the position of being the new Elector on the defeat of John Frederick, Elector of Saxony.

8. April 24, 1547, the next year there was the decisive battle of Muhlberg. Charles V won, the Schmalkaldic League was defeated and both Philip of Hesse and John Frederick of Saxony were captured and imprisoned.
9. ON May 15, 1548, over a year later, a Diet was convened.

1548 Charles imposed a law called the *Augsburg Interim* which demanded that

Lutherans were to restore the number of sacraments (which the Lutherans had reduced to two) to seven, and

that the churches restore a number of Roman ceremonies, doctrines, and practices which had been discarded by the Lutheran reformers, including transubstantiation.

The decree also called for the rejection of the doctrine of justification by faith alone, and required that the Pope be acknowledged as the head of the Church by divine right and that the churches receive again the authority of the Roman bishops.

In concession to the Lutherans, the Interim allowed for the marriage of clergy, and that the laity be given both elements (bread and wine) in communion. Even though Phillip Melancthon, friend and heir-apparent of Luther, was willing to compromise these issues for the sake of peace, **the Augsburg Interim was rejected by a significant number of Lutheran pastors and theologians. Hundreds of pastors were imprisoned, exiled or executed for refusing to follow the regulations of the Interim.**

Key to point out that the interim was forcing subjects to restore heretical doctrines and practices, to reject the doctrine of justification by faith alone, and to acknowledge the Pope as head of the church. This justified disagreement and not signing. At this point they are not the ones who used force. Charles V attacked Magdeburg.

10. The agreement with the Pope authorized Charles V to use force against those who refused to come back to Rome.
11. The only city in all of Germany to resist the Interim was *Magdeburg*. The magistrates protect the people and stood with the Scripture. Charles attacked the city in 1550. The people burned everything outside of the city walls and closed the gates. All of Christendom, and all of Germany went along with the *Interim*, just to get along.

It was at that time that **the pastors of Magdeburg** wrote a defense of their position called the Magdeburg Confession. In there they wrote a defense of their actions. They also wrote an additional 228 tracts and pamphlets which were printed and distributed throughout Germany.

12. They published their Confession and Defense of the Pastors and Other Ministers of the Church of Magdeburg in April 1550. In October of 1550, Charles' forces, led by Maurice, surrounded the city. The people of Magdeburg burned everything outside the city walls and closed. The siege began, it lasted a year.

This fits the biblical pattern.

A couple of things to note before reading it.

1. They don't always define tyranny or unjust laws throughout and many who quote it fail to understand the context. The context is the mandate from Charles V of the HRE who mandated that all subjects follow the Roman Catholic theology. So tyranny is specifically defined as a violation of religious freedom. Clearly an Acts 4 scenario.

2. The principle they affirmed is precisely the one I have stated.

3. In reading the *Confession*, I have also noted that examples which they use of resistance, are not always solid. As we have seen before, the judges of Israel were not resisting their own leaders but conquerors.

4. A common mistake is made therein, that God would not and has not ordained unjust leaders, so that once a ruler violates God's justice, then he is no longer to be thought of as a God ordained magistrate.

5. The bottom line is exactly what I stated.

1. Depending on the legal system, every effort should be made to peaceably reverse a law.

2. Each individual must obey God first in direct commands, rather than human government, when there is a conflict.

3. If the human government then replies with force, as at Magdeburg or Lexington, the lesser magistrates have a right of self-defense. But force in response must be used sparingly.

...Whether a Christian magistrate can or ought to preserve his State and the Christian teachers and hearers in it against his own superior magistrate and drive off by force one who is using force to compel people to reject the true doctrine and true worship of God and to accept idolatry. [49]

Warning ...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.

4. To Charles V they affirmed...

... we will gladly render obedience—as much as we are able and we owe you.

... That except for the preservation of our religion, nothing else is sought; that when this is gained, our Senate and citizens will be most obedient in all their proper duties according to your Majesty's laws.

We again affirm from the sure Word of God that when superior magistrates attempt to force Papistical idolatry upon their citizens, to overwhelm the true worship of God and His true worshippers, just as they have now begun to do, by unjust maneuvers with their laws, even if they pretend otherwise—then pious magistrates are not only able, but even have an obligation to resist them as far as they are able, to defend the true doctrine, worship of God, life, modesty, and the property of their subjects, and preserve them against such tyranny.

The Confession

Nicholas von Amsdorf who was a very close friend of Luther's and who was aware of the plot to kidnap him and take him to the Wartburg castle and was with him in the carriage when he was taken, helped to write this.

1. At the beginning the quote Psa 18, I spoke of your testimonies in the sight of kings, and was not put to shame.

Romans 13, Rulers are not terror for good works but for evil.

Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard to kick against the goad, Acts 9

2. The Confession is divided into 7 chapters.

i. Of God and the distinction of the persons.

ii. Of creation, of the cause of sin, and the chief kinds of sin.

iii. Of the Law.

iv. Of the Gospel and Justification.

v. Of the Sacraments.

vi. Of the Church and its ministers, and of the power of the Church and its ministers.

vii. Of polity and economy, and of the power of each.

The reason for this arrangement is the following: first, because all knowledge about God is either knowledge of His nature or of His will, disclosed either in the creation or in His revealed Word, especially so that the Church might be brought into being, by the ministry of the Law, of the Gospel, and of the Sacraments through men called to this ministry; and also because economy and polity ought to be subservient chiefly to the generating of the Church, or at the very least, for the civil society of men among themselves, when they do not attain any other end.

Pastors of Magdeburg. The Magdeburg Confession: 13th of April 1550 AD (p. 9). Createspace Publishing. Kindle Edition.

6. The siege lasted over a year. During that year, approximately, 4,000 of Charles' army were killed and only 468 Magdeburgers were killed.

The siege ended on Nov 4 1551 with favorable terms for the Magdeburg

Maurice now Elector of Saxony switched back because he was angry that Charles was trying to re-impose RC on Germany. And he was angry that his father in law, Phillip of Hess was still imprisoned, though Charles had promised his release.

If not for the actions of the Magdeburgers, the entire Reformation itself might very well have been a blip on the radar screen of history. Charles had intended to re-Romanize all of the Empire. However, the actions of these reformers clearly led to two very important councils and subsequent treaties. After the siege ended, Maurice of Saxony, along with other German Princes attacked Charles and drove him out of

Germany and into Italy. Charles V, tired of civil war, granted religious freedom to the Reformers at the Peace of Passau in August of 1552, just nine months after the siege of Magdeburg had ended. The Peace of Passau granted peace only until another Imperial Diet could be held. The Diet was held in Augsburg in 1555. The result was the Peace of Augsburg (Sept. 25, 1555) which declared – cuius regio, eius religio (“whosoever region, his religion”). Greatest of all, the siege of Magdeburg produced the Magdeburg Confession, which is the earliest known historical document to lay out in a doctrinal format the lesser magistrate doctrine.

Pastors of Magdeburg. The Magdeburg Confession: 13th of April 1550 AD (p. 90). Createspace Publishing. Kindle Edition.

8. The siege last a year. About 4,000 of Charles army were killed and 468 Magdeburgers died. The siege ended in Nov 4, 1551 with favorable terms from the emperor. Eventually their resistance was responsible for uniting the German states against Charles and pushing his armies out of Germany.

Here's another Aquinas text, this one fairly late (ST II-II q. 42), that endorses tyrannicide (see reply to obj 3):

Article 2. Whether sedition is always a mortal sin?

Objection 1. It would seem that sedition is not always a mortal sin. For sedition denotes "a tumult tending to fight," according to the gloss quoted above (Article 1). But fighting is not always a mortal sin, indeed it is sometimes just and lawful, as stated above (II-II:40:1). Much more, therefore, can sedition be without a mortal sin.

Objection 2. Further, sedition is a kind of discord, as stated above (Article 1, Reply to Objection 3). Now discord can be without mortal sin, and sometimes without any sin at all. Therefore sedition can be also.

Objection 3. Further, it is praiseworthy to deliver a multitude from a tyrannical rule. Yet this cannot easily be done without some dissension in the multitude, if one part of the multitude seeks to retain the tyrant, while the rest strive to dethrone him. Therefore there can be sedition without mortal sin.

On the contrary, The Apostle forbids seditions together with other things that are mortal sins (2 Corinthians 12:20).

I answer that, As stated above (Article 1, Reply to Objection 2), sedition is contrary to the unity of the multitude, viz. the people of a city or kingdom. Now Augustine says (De Civ. Dei ii, 21) that "wise men understand the word people to designate not any crowd of persons, but the assembly of those who are united together in fellowship recognized by law and for the common good." Wherefore it is evident that the unity to which sedition is opposed is the unity of law and common good: whence it follows manifestly that sedition is opposed to justice and the common good. Therefore by reason of its genus it is a mortal sin, and its gravity will be all the greater according as the common good which it assails surpasses the private good which is assailed by strife.

Accordingly the sin of sedition is first and chiefly in its authors, who sin most grievously; and secondly it is in those who are led by them to disturb the common good. Those, however, who defend the common good, and withstand the seditious party, are not themselves seditious, even as neither is a man to be called quarrelsome because he defends himself, as stated above (II-II:41:1).

Reply to Objection 1. It is lawful to fight, provided it be for the common good, as stated above (II-II:40:1). But sedition runs counter to the common good of the multitude, so that it is always a mortal sin.

Reply to Objection 2. Discord from what is not evidently good, may be without sin, but discord from what is evidently good, cannot be without sin: and sedition is discord of this kind, for it is contrary to the unity of the multitude, which is a manifest good.

Reply to Objection 3. A tyrannical government is not just, because it is directed, not to the common good, but to the private good of the

**ruler, as the Philosopher states (Polit. iii, 5; Ethic. viii, 10).
Consequently there is no sedition in disturbing a government of this kind, unless indeed the tyrant's rule be disturbed so inordinately, that his subjects suffer greater harm from the consequent disturbance than from the tyrant's government. Indeed it is the tyrant rather that is guilty of sedition, since he encourages discord and sedition among his subjects, that he may lord over them more securely; for this is tyranny, being conducive to the private good of the ruler, and to the injury of the multitude.**