

SUMMARY

THE SECOND HELVETIC CONFESSION

The word “Helvetic” is Latin for “Swiss.” The setting of the Second Helvetic Confession is Swiss-German Reformed Protestantism.

After the great Reformer Ulrich Zwingli died in battle in 1531, Heinrich Bullinger succeeded him as minister of the church in Zurich. Bullinger was a model Reformed minister. A preacher, he expounded Scripture at least twice a week. A scholar, he wrote Latin commentaries on many books of the Old Testament and on every book of the New Testament except Revelation. An educator, he initiated a system of schools for Zurich and was rector of the Carolinum, a theological academy. A person with ecumenical and political concerns, he was in correspondence with leaders of the Reformation and with rulers throughout Europe. A pastor, he welcomed religious refugees into his own home. When the plague swept through Zurich in 1564, he insisted upon ministering to the afflicted, even though he knew he might become infected and die.

In 1561, Bullinger composed the document that later became known as the Second Helvetic Confession. He intended to attach it to his last will and testament to the Zurich church, but events in Germany soon brought it into the public arena. The publication of the Heidelberg Catechism created trouble for the man who had ordered its preparation. Lutherans considered it too Reformed in spirit, and they demanded that Frederick the Elector, governor of the Palatinate, be brought to trial for heresy. Not a theologian himself, Frederick turned to Bullinger, who offered Frederick this confession as the basis for his defense. When the Imperial Diet, the ruling body of Germany, met for trial in 1566, Frederick was exonerated. Meanwhile, the churches of Switzerland adopted Bullinger’s confession as their new confession of faith. Soon finding wide acceptance throughout Europe and beyond, it was translated into French, English, Dutch, Polish, Hungarian, Italian, Arabic, and Turkish.

Reflecting the theological maturity of the Reformed churches, the Second Helvetic Confession is moderate in tone and catholic in spirit. From the opening paragraphs it emphasizes the church and its life and affirms the authority of the Scriptures for the church’s government and reformation. By including an article on predestination, the confession asks the church to trust in God’s free and gracious election of its membership in Jesus Christ. At the same time, the confession addresses the practical life of the gathered community, detailing matters of worship, church order and conflict, ministry, the sacraments, and marriage.