

Study of Concordia - The Lutheran Confession of Faith

The Unaltered Augsburg Confession

Article XX - Good Works



Review/Summary:

The Augsburg Confession is the specific Lutheran confession of the Christian faith which we believe, teach, and confess in our churches according to God's Holy Word. It was written by Philip Melancthon in consultation with Luther and others and presented to the Diet of Augsburg on June 25, 1530 AD. The aim of the confession was to present as fully as possible the doctrinal articles of the Orthodox Christian faith, as taught in Scripture and the "Church catholic" (universal). Rome had charged Luther and "the Lutherans" of teaching heresy. The Lutherans presented their case before Emperor Charles V, and the confession was accepted making it "legal" to be Lutheran Christians because our teachings did not dissent from the Orthodox Christian teaching of Scripture.

It consists of 28 articles of which the first 21 deal with the "chief articles of faith"— most following the model of Thesis-Antithesis. That is each states the belief we hold and then states the false beliefs which are condemned (as heresy). The last 7 articles are the abuses which had been corrected by the Lutherans, showing why Rome was actually guilty of heresy and justifying the changes made by the Lutherans with regard to customs and ceremonies.

Article I: Of God— This article proceeds from the creeds (especially the Nicene council) and teaches that there are three persons in the God-head who are of the same essence and power and who are co-eternal.

Article II: Of Original Sin— All men are born with sin, that is, without the fear of God, without trust in God, and with concupiscence (desire for sin); and this disease, or vice of origin is truly sin.

Article III: Of The Son of God— Christ Jesus, true God and true man, suffered and died to reconcile the Father unto us and be a sacrifice for all sins of men. He sends the Holy Spirit.

Article IV: Of Justification— The righteousness of Christ is imputed to those who believe.

Article V: Of The Ministry— In order that we may be brought to faith in Jesus Christ the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted by God.

Article VI: Of New Obedience— Faith must bring forth good fruits/works.

Article VII: Of The Church— There is one holy Church. The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the sacraments are rightly administered. It is enough for the true unity of the Church to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments (primary marks).

Article VIII: What the Church Is— Though the Church is the congregation of saints and true believers, nevertheless there are many hypocrites and evil persons in its midst. The sacraments and the Word are effectual by reason of the institution and command of Christ even if they be administered by evil men.

Article IX: Of Baptism— Baptism is necessary to salvation. Children are to be baptized and through baptism they are received into God's grace.

Article X: Of The Lord's Supper— The body and blood of Christ are truly present in, with, and under the bread and wine in the sacrament.

Article XI: Of Confession— Confession and private absolution ought to be retained in the Church, though enumeration of all sins is not necessary.

Article XII: Of Repentance— Repentance is necessary, and consists of contrition and faith.

Article XIII: The Use of the Sacraments— The sacraments are not only marks of professions among men, but signs and testimonies of the will of God toward us, and are instituted to awaken and confirm faith in those who use them

Article XIV: Of Order in the Church— No one should publicly teach in the Church or administer the sacraments unless he be regularly called.

Article XV: Of Church Ceremonies— Usages of ceremonies are profitable for good order and thus should be observed. Such observance, however, is not itself necessary unto salvation. Practices which are contrary to the Gospel should not be tolerated.

Article XVI: Of Civil Government— Lawful civil ordinances are good works of God, and it is right for Christians to accept civil office, to be judges, engage in just wars, serve as soldiers, make oaths, etc.

Article XVII: Of Christ's Return for Judgment— At the end of the world Christ will appear for judgment and give to the godly and elect eternal life, but to ungodly men and the devils, torment without end.

Article XVIII: Of Free Will— Man has some liberty to choose in civil matters (horizontal righteousness), but he has no power without the Holy Spirit to work the righteousness of God (vertical righteousness), that is spiritual righteousness. Though nature is able in a manner to do outward works, such as to keep the hands from theft and murder (even in unregenerate man), yet nature cannot produce the inward motions such as the fear of God, trust in God, etc.

Article XIX: Of The Cause of Sin— The cause of sin is the will of wicked man and of the Devil.

Article XX: Good Works

Note: This is another key article in the Augsburg Confession. Article XX offers more details about faith and works than what was previously written. Lutherans insist on the biblical truth that our good works do not save us. So they are sometimes accused of opposing good works. This article sets forth the Bible's clear teaching that good works are the fruit of faith, not the cause of our salvation. The Lutheran hymn "Salvation unto Us Has Come" offers a short, powerful summary of these essential Gospel truths:

Faith clings to Jesus' cross alone
And rests in Him unceasing;
And by its fruits true faith is known,
with love and hope increasing.
For faith alone can justify;
Works serve our neighbor and supply
The proof that faith is living.

(Paul Speratus, 1484–1531; tr. *The Lutheran Hymnal*, 1941, alt.)

Rome continues to insist that people are saved by God's grace, but not through faith alone. This teaching dangerously encourages people to believe they are able, even in some small way, to contribute toward their salvation. This diverts their focus from Christ and His merits to their own works. It also leads to despair, doubt, and uncertainty when people come to realize the enormity of their sin and wonder if in fact they have done "enough" to merit or deserve God's favor. After setting forth the proper biblical distinction between faith and good works, the Augsburg Confession asserts very clearly that our good works are necessary, not to merit grace, but because this is God's will for our lives. God's gift of saving faith enables us to do good works. (See also Ap XX; SA III XIII; FC Ep IV and SD IV.)

¹ Our teachers are falsely accused of forbidding good works. ² Their published writings on the Ten Commandments, and other similar writings, bear witness that they have usefully taught about all estates and duties of life. They have taught well what is pleasing to God in every station and vocation in life. ³ Before now, preachers taught very little about these things. They encouraged only childish and needless works, such as particular holy days, particular fasts, brotherhoods, pilgrimages, services in honor of the saints, the use of rosaries, monasticism, and such things. ⁴ Since our adversaries have been admonished about these things, they are now unlearning them. They do not preach these unhelpful works as much as they used to. ⁵ In the past, there was only stunning silence about faith, but now they are beginning to mention it. ⁶ They do not teach that we are justified only by works. They join faith and works together, and say that we are justified by faith and works. ⁷ This teaching is more tolerable than the former one. It can offer more consolation than their old teaching.

⁸ The doctrine about faith, which ought to be the chief doctrine in the Church, has remained unknown for so long. Everyone has to admit that there was the deepest silence in their sermons concerning the righteousness of faith. They only taught about works in the churches. This is why our teachers teach the churches about faith in this way.

⁹ First, they teach that our works cannot reconcile God to us or merit forgiveness of sins, grace, and justification. We obtain reconciliation only by faith when we believe that we are received into favor for Christ's sake. He alone has been set forth as the Mediator and Atoning Sacrifice (1 Timothy 2:5), in order that the Father may be reconciled through Him. ¹⁰ Therefore, whoever believes that he merits grace by works despises the merit and grace of Christ [Galatians 5:4]. In so doing, he is seeking a way to God without Christ, by human strength, although Christ Himself said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6).

¹¹ This doctrine about faith is presented everywhere by Paul, "By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8).

¹² If anyone wants to be tricky and say that we have invented a new interpretation of Paul, this entire matter is supported by the testimony of the Fathers. ¹³ Augustine defends grace and the righteousness of faith in many volumes against the merits of works. ¹⁴ Ambrose, in his book *The Calling of the Gentiles*, and elsewhere, teaches the same thing. In *The Calling of the Gentiles* he says,

Redemption by Christ's blood would be worth very little, and God's mercy would not surpass man's works, if justification, which is accomplished through grace, were due to prior merits. So justification would not be the free gift from a donor, but the reward due the laborer.

¹⁵ Spiritually inexperienced people despise this teaching. However, God-fearing and anxious consciences find by experience that it brings the greatest consolation. Consciences cannot be set at rest through any works, but only by faith, when they take the sure ground that for Christ's sake they have a gracious God. ¹⁶ As Paul teaches, "since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God" (Romans 5:1). ¹⁷ This whole doctrine must be related to the conflict of the terrified conscience. It cannot be understood apart from that conflict. ¹⁸ Therefore, inexperienced and irreverent people have poor judgment in this matter because they dream that Christian righteousness is nothing but civil and philosophical righteousness.

¹⁹ Until now consciences were plagued with the doctrine of works. They did not hear consolation from the Gospel. ²⁰ Some people were driven by conscience into the desert and into monasteries, hoping to merit grace by a monastic life. ²¹ Some people came up with other works to merit grace and make satisfaction for sins. ²² That is why the need was so great for teaching and renewing the doctrine of faith in Christ, so that anxious consciences would not be without consolation but would know that grace, forgiveness of sins, and justification are received by faith in Christ.

²³ People are also warned that the term *faith* does not mean simply a knowledge of a history, such as the ungodly and devil have [James 2:19]. Rather, it means a faith that believes, not merely the history, but also the effect of the history. In other words, it believes this article: the forgiveness of sins. We have grace, righteousness, and forgiveness of sins through Christ.

²⁴ The person who knows that he has a Father who is gracious to him through Christ truly knows God [John 14:7]. He also knows that God cares for him [1 Peter 5:7], and he calls upon God [Romans 10:13]. In a word, he is not without God, as are the heathen. ²⁵ For devils and the ungodly are not able to believe this article: the forgiveness of sins. Hence, they hate God as an enemy [Romans 8:7] and do not call Him [Romans 3:11–12] and expect no good from Him. ²⁶ Augustine also warns his readers about the word *faith* and teaches that the term is used in the Scriptures, not for the knowledge that is in the ungodly, but for the confidence that consoles and encourages the terrified mind.

²⁷ Furthermore, we teach that it is necessary to do good works. This does not mean that we merit grace by doing good works, but because it is God's will [Ephesians 2:10]. ²⁸ It is only by faith, and nothing else, that forgiveness of sins is apprehended. ²⁹ The Holy Spirit is received through faith, hearts are renewed and given new affections, and then they are able to bring forth good works. ³⁰ Ambrose says: "Faith is the mother of a good will and doing what is right." ³¹ Without the Holy Spirit people are full of ungodly desires. They are too weak to do works that are good in God's sight [John 15:5]. ³² Besides, they are in the power of the devil, who pushes human beings into various sins, ungodly opinions, and open crimes. ³³ We see this in the philosophers, who, although they tried to live an honest life could not succeed, but were defiled with many open crimes. ³⁴ Such is human weakness, without faith and without the Holy Spirit, when governed only by human strength.

³⁵ Therefore, it is easy to see that this doctrine is not to be accused of banning good works. Instead, it is to be commended all the more because it shows how we are enabled to do good works. ³⁶ For without faith, human nature cannot, in any way, do the works of the First or Second Commandment [1 Corinthians 2:14]. ³⁷ Without faith, human nature does not call upon God, nor expect anything from Him, nor bear the cross [Matthew 16:24]. Instead, human nature seeks and trusts in human help. ³⁸ So when there is no faith and trust in God, all kinds of lusts and human intentions rule in the heart [Genesis 6:5]. ³⁹ This is why Christ says, "Apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). That is why the Church sings: "Lacking Your divine favor, there is nothing in man. ⁴⁰ Nothing in him is harmless."

McCain, P. T. (Ed.). (2005). *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions* (pp. 41–44). St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House.

Outline:

- A. Our teachers have falsely been accused of forbidding good works. (1)
- B. The adversaries really taught little of true good works. (3)
- C. They taught useless works such a rosaries, monasticism, pilgrimages, etc. (3,4)
- D. They do not teach now that we become righteous before God by works alone, but they add faith (a historical knowledge) in Christ. (6)
- E. Works cannot reconcile us with God. We are reconciled through faith (when we believe our sins are forgiven). (9)
- F. The conscience cannot come to rest through works, but only through faith (when it is assured for Christ's sake it has a gracious God). (16)
- G. Faith is not a mere knowledge of historical events as the devil and the ungodly possess. (25)
- H. Good works must be done, not that we rely on them to earn grace but that we may do God's will and glorify him. (27)
- I. When through faith the Holy Spirit is given, the heart is moved to do good works. Without the Holy Spirit we cannot do good works. (29)
- J. We do not forbid good works but teach that good works are to be done and offer help as to how they may be done. (35)

Questions:

*Assuming it is more than mere slander, why would some people accuse Lutherans of “forbidding good works?”
On what would that assumption be based?*

According to Galatians 5:1-6 when can good works be harmful?

In Galatians 5:4, why would Paul tell people seeking to do good: you have “cut yourselves off from Christ”? When would doing good works actually be an insult to the work of Christ?

How does Article XX define faith (line 23)? Why does the Augsburg Confession tie this specifically to the forgiveness of sins?

Article XX on Good Works is the longest we have seen so far. In your own words, explain why you would say that faith is the “chief doctrine of the Church”?

Who/What determines works to be “good”?

In what sense are good works “necessary”? (line 27) Can a person be saved without doing good works?

How is the Holy Spirit’s role essential in faith and good works in our lives?

Scripture Passages:

Galatians 5:1–6 (ESV)

Christ Has Set Us Free

5 For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

²Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. ³I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. ⁴You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.

⁵For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. ⁶For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.