

The Formula of Concord

Article IV: Good Works

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Introduction

“Of the making of books there is no end.” I don’t know who originally said that. It doesn’t really make a big difference as far as eternity is concerned.

“Of the writing of articles and books and conferences papers that deal with God and His love and man and his sin and God’s grace and the forgiveness of sins and the faith that God gives and the good works that the Holy Spirit produces in the life of the believing child of God there will be no end.” I know who said that. I just did. And I am thankful that I can. It comes as no surprise to this essayist that his quote refers to the truths that touch on that which is at the very center of God’s revelation to man: His love manifested in the person of Jesus Christ. Since the Fall His redeeming love in Christ is for me and for you and for all sinners for now and for ever. It is a truth for which in the course of human history countless men and women and children –“the LORD knows them that are His have literally been moved to give their “blood, sweat and tears,” to stake their very lives on the truthfulness of the divine Word, to sacrifice all rather than fall away from faith in the Risen One, and to seal their faith with their own blood You and I have been called by Him into the holy ministry to preach and teach the truth of this Gospel and with it to reach to the ends of the earth. Not even the angels of heaven are so privileged.

If you have not taken the time to read, much less to study Article IV of the Formula of Concord for today’s conference, I would urge you to do so as soon as possible. You will be richer for the exercise. There is always tremendous blessing in prayerfully and carefully reading and considering what our fathers in the Lutheran faith have written over 410 years ago. The truths they express like the One from whom they come are eternal and therefore always relevant for us, our respective ministries and the Church. I herewith present in the LORD the following “gleanings” of my study for the mutual joy and edification in our most holy faith.

Historical Background

In his book *Outline of the Book of Concord* the Rev. Lyle W. Lange summarizes most beautifully and succinctly for us in this way the historical background of the Formula of Concord:

“Some, while boasting of and benefiting from their adherence to the Augsburg Confession, dared to give a false interpretation to the articles contained therein. This caused serious and dangerous schisms in the true Evangelical churches (of the 1500’s).”

“Similarly at the present time our adversaries, the papists, rejoice over the schisms which have occurred among us in the unchristian but futile hope their disagreements will ultimately lead to the ruin of the pure doctrine.”

“These controversies deal with weighty and important matters and they are of such a nature that the opinions of the erring party cannot be tolerated in the church of God.”

Hence, “we pledge ourselves to:

1. the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments as the pure and clear fountain of Israel, which is the only true norm according to which all teachers are to be judged and evaluated;

2. the three (3) general Creeds (Apostles' c.a. 2nd & 3rd centuries; Nicene 325 A.D.; and the Athanasian c.a. 450-600 A.D.);
3. the first, unaltered Augsburg Confession (1530);
4. the Apology (1531);
5. the Smalcald Amides (1537);
6. Dr. Martin Luther's Small and Large Catechisms (1529).ⁱ

It is noted that all parenthetical inclusions above are mine.

Outline of the Formula of Concord

1. Of Original Sin
2. Of Free Will or Human Powers
3. Of the Righteousness of Faith Before God
4. Of Good Works
5. Of Law and Gospel
6. Of the True Function of the Law
7. Of the Holy Supper
8. Of the Person of Christ
9. Of Christ's Descent into Hell
10. Of the Ecclesiastical Rites that Are Called Adiaphora or Things Indifferent.
11. Of Eternal Foreknowledge and Divine Election
12. Of Other Factions and Sects Which Never Accepted the Augsburg Confession

Article IV: Of Good Works

“A disagreement has occurred among the theologians of the Augsburg Confession concerning good works ...one part employing the following manner of speaking of them: good works are necessary for salvation; it is impossible to be saved without good works; likewise no one has ever been saved without good works.- the other part contended, on the contrary, that good works are indeed necessary; however, not for salvation, but for other reasons” (Almsdorf, Flacius) “and that on their account the aforementioned ...expressions (as they are not in accord with the form of sound doctrine and with the Word” and “have ...and are still ...in opposition to the doctrine of our Christian faith. in which we confess that faith alone justifies and saves) are not to be tolerated in the Church, in order that the merit of Christ, our Savior, be not diminished, and the promise of salvation may be and remain firm and certain to believers.”ⁱⁱ

“In this controversy also the following ...expression was employed ...that good works are injurious” (detrimental) “to salvation.” (Note: Almsdorf was the only theologian of notable importance to hold this view.) Also “...it was argued by some that good works are not necessary but are voluntary (free and spontaneous), because they are not extorted by fear and the penalty of the Law, but are to be done from a voluntary spirit and a joyful heart ...the other side contended that good works are necessary”ⁱⁱⁱ i.e. referring “to the immutable order which binds all people to be obedient to God” or implying “the coercion with which the Law forces people to do good works.”^{iv} Later a dispute arose “that because of the divine order ...new obedience is not necessary in the regenerated (the Second Antinomian Controversy).”^v

“In order to explain this disagreement in a Christian way and according to the guidance of God's Word, and by His grace to settle it completely our doctrine, faith, and confession are as follows:^{vi}

1. “It is God's will and ordinance that believers do good works.
2. Only what God prescribes in His Word is a good work, not what a person may devise of his own opinion or by human tradition.

3. Good works are not done by a person's natural powers but only after a person has been reconciled to God through faith and renewed through the Holy Spirit" or as St. Paul says, "created in Christ Jesus to do good works" (Ep 2:10).^{vii}

Concerning those three (3) points there was no controversy. Likewise, there was no controversy regarding the following three (3) points:

1. Civic righteousness, though praiseworthy and rewarded by God, is still sin because it does not flow from true faith;
2. Faith alone is the mother and source of truly good and God-pleasing works that God will reward both in this life and in the next. Therefore they are called by St. Paul true fruits of faith and/or of the Spirit.^{viii}
3. As Luther writes: "Faith is a divine work in us that transforms us and begets us anew from God, kills the Old Adam, makes us entirely different people in heart, spirit, mind, and all our powers, and brings the Holy Spirit with it. Oh, faith is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, so that it is impossible for it not to be constantly doing what is good. Likewise, faith does not ask if good works are to be done, but before one can ask, faith has already done them and is constantly active. Whoever does not perform such good works is a faithless man, blindly tapping around in search of faith and good works without knowing what either faith or good works are, and in the meantime he chatters and jabbars a great deal about faith and good works. Faith is a vital, deliberate trust in God's grace, so certain that it would die a thousand times for it. And such confidence and knowledge of divine grace makes us joyous, mettlesome, and merry. toward God and all creatures. This the Holy Spirit works by faith, and therefore without any coercion a man is willing and desirous to do good to everyone, to serve everyone, to suffer everything for the love of God and to His glory, who has been so gracious to him. It is therefore as impossible to separate works from faith as it is to separate heat and light from fire."^{ix}

Regarding the contested points, however, these explanations are given:

"Both the Augsburg Confession and the Apology often employ statements like these:

- a. "Good works are necessary.
- b. "It is necessary to do good works because they necessarily follow faith and reconciliation.
- c. "We should and must of necessity do good works that God has commanded.

"Likewise, the Holy Scripture itself uses words like 'necessity,' 'necessary,' 'needful,' 'should,' and 'must' to indicate what we are bound to do because of God's ordinance, commandment, and will (Ro 13:5, 6, 9; 1 C o 9:9; Ac 5:29; Jn 15:12; 1 Jn 4:11).^x Hence "it is wrong to criticize this verbiage when used in its strict and Christian sense."^{xi}

When the word necessary is used in the Lutheran Confessions, it should be understood not of coercion, but only of the ordinance of the unchangeable will of God. God does not want or approve of obedience (works) without and against a person's will. Both Old and New Testaments are replete with passages which speak of God's people being "willing" (Ps 110:3), who "sacrifice a freewill offering" (Ps 54:6), "not reluctantly or under compulsion" (2 C o 9:7), but who "wholeheartedly obey" (Ro 7:17). After ad, the Scripture declares to us: "God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Co 9:7).

The Formula concludes this section with the words: "In this understanding and in such sense it is correctly said and taught that truly good works should be done willingly or from a voluntary spirit by those whom the Son of God has made free..."^{xii}

At this point, the Formula makes note of the fact that the dual nature of the Christian, as expressed by St. Paul in Ro 7 8t 8, 1 Co 9, and Ga 5 must be kept in mind at all times. It also rejects as false the view that good works are free to believers in the sense that it lies within their free option if they may or want to do or not to do them or to act in a contrary fashion and nonetheless still retain faith and God's mercy and grace.^{xiii}

The framers of the Formula were careful to point out that when it is taught that good works are necessary, it also must be explained why and for what reason they are necessary, as do the Augsburg Confession (Art. VI and XX) and the Apology (Art. IV). The caution is cited, however, that "we must be well on our guard lest works are drawn and mingled into the article of justification and salvation."^{xiv} To state "that to believers good works are necessary for salvation, so that it is impossible to be saved without good works" is to directly contradict and to be in conflict with the words of St. Paul who has completely excluded our works and merits from the article of justification and salvation, and ascribed everything to the grace of God and the merits of Christ alone as explained in Article III. To not do so robs the sinner's troubled conscience of the sweet comfort of the Gospel, confirms trust in one's own righteousness and vitiates the pure doctrine of God's free salvation - alone by grace, alone through faith, alone for the sake of Christ.^{xv}

As such, the Formula concurs with Luther in condemning as contrary to sound doctrine the heresies of the Judaizers of St. Paul's day, the papists and the Anabaptists of his own day as well as others among his own followers. Accordingly, Tappert states unequivocally that "for these reasons it is right for our churches to insist that the aforementioned propositions are not to be taught, defended, or condoned, but are to be expelled and rejected by our churches as false and incorrect..."^{xvi}

Since a dispute had also arisen as to whether good works preserve salvation or are necessary to preserve faith, righteousness and salvation, it was necessary for our church fathers to reject outright in the Formula the false Epicurean delusion that it is impossible for the believer to lose his faith and the gift of salvation through any one sin or combination of sins. On the contrary, Christians were earnestly urged to take seriously the many threats and admonitions of a holy God found throughout Scripture.^{xvii}

Here the words of the Apology (Art. W on the passage from 2 Pe 1:10 are quoted: "Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure" following which it says: "Peter teaches why good works should be done, namely, that we may make our calling sure, that is, we may not fall from our calling if we again sin. Do good works," he says, "that you may persevere in your heavenly calling, that you may not fall away again, and lose the Spirit and the gifts, which come to you, not on account of works that follow, but of grace, through Christ. and are now retained by faith. But faith does not remain in those who lead a sinful life, lost the Holy Ghost, and reject repentance."^{xviii}

This does not mean, however, that faith accepts righteousness and salvation at the beginning and then delegates this to works, as if works should preserve faith. On the contrary, Paul ascribes to faith not only our entry into grace but also our present state of grace and our hope of sharing the glory of God (Or 5:2). In the words of the Formula, "he attributes to faith alone the beginning, the middle, and the end of everything ...(Ro 11:20; Co 1:22; 1 Pe 1:5, 9)."^{xix}

It is evident from the Word of God that faith is the proper and the only means whereby righteousness and salvation are not only received but also preserved by God. Therefore all opinions and statements are soundly rejected by our Lutheran fathers that would suggest that our good works either entirely or in part sustain either the righteousness of faith that we have received or even faith itself."^{xx} The power God uses to create faith in us is the same one He uses to preserve it in us. This power of His belongs alone to the Gospel, the good news of sins fully, freely and forever forgiven through the God-Man, Jesus Christ, who was crucified on Calvary and raised to life in Joseph's garden (Ro 1:16, 17; Ro 10:17; 1 Pe 1:5). It is He alone, the holy Son of God, who came from heaven to earth to pay a debt He did not owe because we, the sinful sons of men, owed a debt we could never pay.

In response to the psalmist's question: "How can I repay the LORD for all His goodness to me?," we answer with him in Spirit-worked, faith-born love: "I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD" (Ps 116:114).

The Formula concludes its fourth article (“Of Good Works”) with the following points concerning the proposition that good works are detrimental to salvation:

1. “If anyone draws good works into the article on justification, St. Paul himself declares that good works are not only useless and a hindrance but also actually harmful and injurious to the person (Phil 3:7ff);
2. “It does not follow, however, that good works are injurious to believers for or as regards their salvation; for in believers good works are indications of salvation when they are done from true causes and for true ends, that is, in the sense in which God requires them of the regenerated;
3. “It is God’s will and command that believers should do good works, which the Holy Spirit works in believers, and with which God is pleased for Christ’s sake, and to which He promises a glorious reward of grace in this life and the life to come.
4. “Since Christians are not to be deterred from good works, but are most diligently to be admonished and urged to apply themselves to good works, we cannot and should not tolerate, or defend this proposition, *unqualifiedly stated* (emphasis mine), in our church.^{xxi}

There is an excellent article by Roger L. Sommer in *The Abiding Word*, Vol. Two entitled “Sanctification” which I would suggest to you for reading. It makes these four points: 1) Sanctification is the work of the Holy Spirit alone-, it is the work of His grace and mercy; 2) This work is carried on only in the Christian, the believer, not in the unbeliever; 3) The Holy Spirit uses the means of grace to produce the fruits of sanctification, and God also employs certain conditions which favor the application of the means of grace (i.e. tribulations, sorrow, strange experiences, chastisements, punishments, etc; 4) Sanctification is finally complete and perfect in heaven.^{xxii}

In summary, the Holy Spirit sanctifies the sinner by the Gospel, leading him to hate sin and to be eager to live a holy life filled with good works. The believer is able to do good works because the Holy Spirit gives him a new heart in which Christ lives by faith. He gladly does good works as fruits of faith to express his love and thanks to God for all His goodness to him. The believer’s guideline is always his Savior God’s will as expressed in His Word. Good works, therefore, are whatever a believer does according to God’s Word out of love and thanks for God’s love. God considers such works “good” only because He delights in everything a believing child does out of love for His Savior-Son, Jesus.

Application

In Thesis XVI of *Law and Gospel* C.F. Walter says: “In the twelfth place, the Word of God is not rightly divided when the preacher tries to make people believe that they are truly converted as soon as they have become rid of certain vices and engage in certain works of piety and virtuous practices.”^{xxiii}

In the next paragraphs of this excellent treatise he makes the following points: that a worse commingling of Law and Gospel than that which is censured in this thesis is not possible ...woe to the minister who his manner of preaching leads his hearers to imagine that they are good Christians if they have ceased robbing and stealing, and that by and by they will get rid of any weakness still remaining in them. They turn the Gospel into Law because they represent conversion as a work of man, while genuine conversion, which produced a living faith in a person is effected only by the Gospel... the doctrine which proposes to make men godly by their own works is the doctrine of pagans ...love does not enter a person’s heart except through faith. How blind, then must a preacher be who proposes to make men godly by urging them to do good works! ...Even believing pastors may, without being aware of it, slip into a horrible commingling of Law and Gospel-many pastors and congregations make mistakes in applying church discipline ...Opening purses by means of the Law is no achievement at all...”...Citing Luther he writes: “Our doctrine, then denounces all works a worthless and futile if the person doing them has not been born again...the principal part of the instruction which people must be given regarding the new birth is this: they must first be told that they are all spiritually dead and that any good ...will not help them a whit to obtain forgiveness of sins, until they are born again and made new creatures”...

Remember, if you do not tell your people this truth, if you do not wield this trusty weapon in your ministry, you will gather about you a congregation of none but legalistic Pharisees”...and again quoting the sainted doctor writes: “Good and pious works never produce a good and pious person; but a good and pious person produces good and pious works. In every instance the person must first be good and pious before he can do any good work. Good works follow and proceed from, a pious and good person as Christ says, Mt. 7:18: ‘A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit.’ Now it is evident that fruits do not bear the tree, nor does the tree grow on the fruit, but the reverse - trees bear fruits, and fruits grow on trees, As there must be trees before there can be fruits, and as the fruits do not make the tree either good or corrupt, but the tree produces the fruits. even so man must first be either good or corrupt before he does good or corrupt works. His works do not make him either good or corrupt, but he does either good or corrupt works ...according as man is either a believer or an unbeliever, his works are either good or evil, not vice versa, so that he would be godly and a believer according to his works. Since works do not make men believers, they do not make his godly either. But faith, which makes men godly, likewise produces good works.”^{xxiv}

How we ought be thrilled, brothers, to read this central truth of God’s Word: “But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of His mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that having been justified by His grace. we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. This is a trustworthy saying” (Ti 3:4-8). How we ought beware and be aware of any attempt of the devil, the world or our sinful flesh to contaminate the truth of God’s Word: “We maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the Law” (Ro 3:28). How we ought pray that the LORD of the Church help us walk the “verbal tightrope” when expounding on passages like James 2:17: “Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by actions is dead,” lest we confuse law and gospel to the detriment of souls precious to the Savior!

Conclusion

In conclusion I share with you the words which terminate the *Preface to the Concordia Triglotta*. They speak for themselves: “May God be pleased as in the past, so also in the future, to bless our church, and graciously keep her in the true and only saving Christian faith as set forth and confessed in the Lutheran symbols, whose paramount object is to maintain the gem of Luther’s Reformation, the blessed doctrine of salvation by grace only, which most wonderfully magnifies the great glory of our God, and alone is able to impart solace to poor sinners” (F. Bente, July 4, 1921).^{xxv}

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ⁱ Lyle W. Lange *Outline of the Book of Concord* (Milwaukee: NPH, 1994), p. 101

ⁱⁱ *Concordia Triglotta*. (St. Louis: CPH, 1921), p. 939.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Lange, op. cit. p. 111.

^v Theodore G. Tappert. *The Book of Concord*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), pp. 551-552.

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- ^{vi} *Concordia Triglotta*, op. cit. p. 939.
- ^{vii} Tappert, op. cit. p. 552.
- ^{viii} *Concordia Triglotta*, op. cit. p. 941.
- ^{ix} Tappert, op. cit. pp. 552-553.
- ^x *Ibid*, p. 553.
- ^{xi} Lange, op. cit. p. 12.
- ^{xii} *Concordia Trig*, op. cit. p. 943.
- ^{xiii} Tappert, op. cit. p. 554.
- ^{xiv} *Concordia Triglotta*, op. cit. p. 945.
- ^{xv} *Ibid*, p. 945.
- ^{xvi} Tappert, op. cit. p. 555.
- ^{xvii} *Concordia Triglotta*, op. cit. p. 947.
- ^{xviii} *Ibid*, pp. 947-948.
- ^{xix} *Ibid*, p. 949.
- ^{xx} *Ibid*.
- ^{xxi} Lange, op. cit. p. 113.
- ^{xxii} Laetsch, Theodore. *The Abiding Word, Vol. Two*. (St. Louis: CPH, 1947) p. [page number does not appear in manuscript—ed.]
- ^{xxiii} Walther, C.F. *Law And Gospel*. (St. Louis: CPH, 1928), p. 299.
- ^{xxiv} *Ibid*, pp. 299-306.
- ^{xxv} *Concordia Triglotta*, op. cit. p. [page number does not appear in manuscript—ed.]