

A Bible Study on the Formula of Concord with Orderly and Sufficient Bible Verses for Use in a Bible Class

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Introduction

“On May 29, 1577, at Bergen Abbey near Magdeburg, Germany, in an hour of crisis for Christendom, six men affixed their signatures to a document which subsequently saved the Lutheran Church from dissolution and extinction. That day proved to be a significant day in history. That document has directly affected the life of every person reading these lines. That document, *The Formula of Concord*, is 400 years old this month... If our Lutheran heritage is important to us, so is the story behind the *Formula* and the *Book of Concord*. During the next three years, beginning with this issue and concluding with the June 22 issue of 1980, God willing, the columns of this journal will retell that momentous, almost unbelievable story.”

Prof. Joel C. Gerlach of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary wrote the words above for the May 1, 1977, Northwestern Lutheran.

The life histories of the six men who wrote *The Formula of Concord* are given in the 1977 *Northwestern Lutheran*, pages 168, 198, 229, 261, and 313. .

Articles on the twelve individual sections of *The Formula of Concord* are found in *The Northwestern Lutheran* beginning in 1977 on page 405 and ending in 1978 on page 233.

Any member of a Bible Class desiring more information on *The Formula of Concord* may purchase the 120 page book, *Getting into The Formula of Concord*, by E. F. Klug, with a translation of the Epitome by O. F. Stahlke, printed in 1977 by Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, Missouri.

Part One—Original Sin

God’s creation of all things, including man, was perfect, Genesis 1:27,31, John 1:3 and 1 Tim. 4:4a, free from the taint of sin. Sin is not a part of man’s *essential* nature; Jesus Christ became true man in every respect, Heb. 2:14,17, yet He was without sin, Heb. 4:15, 2 Cor. 5:21. (Note: The words, “took not on *him the nature of* angels,” *KJV*, in Heb. 2:16 should not be used to emphasize our Lord’s human nature.) All men are God’s creation after the Fall, Job 10:8, Is. 54:5, 64:8, Acts 17:25-28; nevertheless, *He* is not responsible for the sin that afflicts mankind.

Sin is the work of Satan, Gen. 3:1f. The corruption of sin is transmitted from parent to child, Gen. 5:3, Job 14:4, Ps. 51:5, 58:3, Rom. 5:12,19. Thus we are sinners from birth, Gen. 8:21, in need of spiritual regeneration, John 3:3-6, Rom. 8:1-11.

There is nothing in us that has not been corrupted by sin, Psalm 14:3, 143:2, Rom. 3:9-12,22-23, 1 John 1:8. Being “dead in sins,” we could do *nothing* to cooperate in our salvation, Eph. 2:1-10. We were excluded from heaven, Eph. 2:3. Salvation became ours only by faith in Christ Jesus, Gal. 3:22, who atoned for *all* our sins, 1 John 1:7b.

We are “by nature” sinful, yet sin is not a part of us; it “*dwells*” in us, Rom. 7:17-20. We are to “put off” sin in this earthly life, Col. 3:1-11, while living in expectation of the time when we will rise bodily, Job 19:25-27, without any taint of sin, Rev. 7:9-17; to live forever in the holiness in which God first made man.

Part Two—Free Will

Human reason argues, “If man can reject God’s grace by unbelief, then it must be by man’s free choice that God’s grace is accepted.” So the question is, “Are we saved only by the *grace* of God as He works through His Word, or is there a third cooperating cause in man’s conversion: the assenting will of man?” We must also ask, “What is the spiritual condition of all individual since the Fall, before the conversion of the individual to faith in Christ Jesus?”

Man has a perfectly free will in sinful matters. He delights in sin, Prov. 1:22, 2:14, Is, 66:3b, not realizing the bondage in which sin holds him. Because of original sin, man's will is found to be in opposition to God's will, Gen. 6:5, Rom. 3:10-12. Sin has destroyed man's ability, on his own, to will to do good, Rom. 7:18-19. Man has become an enemy of God, Rom. 8:7-8.

Some people may choose to perform acts of civic righteousness, but this isn't the righteousness of God, Is. 64:6, Rom. 10:3, 14:23b, Heb. 11:6a.

Before regeneration, a person is "*dead* in trespasses and sins," Eph. 2:1,5, unable to help himself in any way, and therefore unable to assist or cooperate in his conversion, Mat. 7:18b, Rom. 3:11. It is, accordingly, incorrect for anyone to talk about "Making a decision for Christ," as if this were an essential first step in conversion.

The spiritual truths of God are folly to unregenerate men, Prov. 1:7, 1 Cor. 2:14. By means of His Word, Rom. 10:17, God breaks through man's prideful unbelief. Read Rom. 10:14-21 and Ps. 95:7b-8. *Thus God alone* is responsible for the salvation of sinners, Acts 16:4, Rom. 9:16; 1 Cor. 12:3, 2 Cor. 3:5, Col. 1:21, 2:13. Our salvation is by the grace of God, not by any works of man, Rom. 3:28, 11:6, Gal. 5:4, Eph. 2:8-9.

God in His grace gives His reborn children the will and the power to produce good works pleasing to Him, Ezekiel 36:25-27, John 15:5. His children are "servants of righteousness," Rom. 6:18, with no reason at all to boast about the good works, 1 Cor. 9:16, 2 Cor. 12:5, that God accomplishes through them.

Part Three—Righteousness of Faith Before God

The most precious teaching of Christianity is justification of the sinner before God by faith in Christ alone without the works of the Law, Rom. 4:1-8, Gal. 3:11. All man-made religions make it man's responsibility to attain the favor of his god(s). Christianity alone points to *Christ* the Lamb of God, Who offered himself as the one perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world, John 3:16. Our salvation is the work of Christ alone, John 19:30, with no participation on the part of any man, Rom. 3:24,28, 5:6, Eph. 2:8. Faith simply appropriates the merits of Christ, Acts 16:31, Rom. 3:28, 5:18.

The human and divine natures of Jesus, our Savior, have been inseparably united since His incarnation, Is. 9:6, Jer. 23:5-6, Mat. 1:20, 16:16, 22:41-45, Rom. 9:5, 1 Cor. 15:47. Therefore, when the Bible speaks of the redemptive work of Christ, it shows that He is our Redeemer both as true *God* and as true *man*, Rom. 5:19, 8:32, 1 Cor. 2:8, Gal 2:20, 1 Peter 2:24, 3:18, 4:1. Thus we may properly say that, "God died for us."

Jesus, our Substitute, atoned for our sins by His *active* obedience, fulfilling the Law of God perfectly, John 8:46a, Heb. 4:15, and also by His *passive* obedience, bearing all our guilt, suffering the full punishment that our sins deserved, Is. 53:4f, 2 Cor. 5:21.

The justification of a sinner is not a gradual process of increasing inner righteousness, but a perfect act of God, Who pronounces a repentant, believing sinner righteous, as the word, *justify*, is used in Prov. 17:15, Rom. 8:33. Righteousness comes from God to us from outside us, Rom. 4:5, 5:18, 8:33. The good works of a Christian which may be called "works of righteousness" always *follow* justifying faith, for faith is never alone, Eph. 2:8-10, James 2:20, 1 John 3:14.

Part Four—Good Works

It is impossible for good works to play any part in our justification before God, Rom. 4:6-8, Eph. 2:8-9. Justification is by grace alone, Luke 7:50, Rom. 1:17, 1 Peter 1:1. Good works, as fruits of a saving faith, show this justification before men, Luke 7:47, 1 Peter 2:9f. They are a witness to the saving faith that is worked in the saints by the Holy Spirit, John 13:35, James 2:20-26, 1 John 2:3.

In that good works will surely follow after a true and living faith as the fruits of a good tree, Mat. 12:33, we may say that good works are a "necessary" part of a Christian's life, Luke 3:8-14, Titus 2:11-14, 2 Peter 1:10. Good works are not optional for a Christian.

No one but a Christian can do good works, Mat. 7:21-23. Christians produce good works not by the compulsion of God's Law, but of a free and willing spirit, out of love for righteousness, Rom. 6:14,22,7:6,

8:14-15. Good works *follow* true faith; sanctification follows justification. This truth gives us a proper understanding and appreciation of Rev. 14:13, which is used at the grave in the service of Christian burial.

Good works do not preserve faith, though bad works destroy it, Rom. 6:1-2, 1 Cor. 5:6, 1 Peter 2:11. Our willingness to do good as children of God is not perfect, Rom. 7:14-25, Gal. 5:17. Such weakness, however, is not held against us, Rom. 8:1.

One should not indulge in self-chosen works while despising the works prescribed by God, Mat. 22:35-40, Rom. 13:8-10. One should never confuse “works of the law,” Gal. 3:10, with true fruits of faith. One should correct every misguided person who says, “If I believe in God and do right I will get to heaven.” James 2:19, Eph. 2:8-9. Confidence in good works destroys faith.

Part Five—The Law and the Gospel

A proper distinction must always be made between the differing natures and purposes of the Law and the Gospel. The *Law* is a preaching of man’s condemnation before a holy God, and its function is to reprove sin and destroy every self-righteous pretension to holiness in man, Rom. 3:20, 7:7, Mat. 5:21-48. The *Gospel* teaches that Christ has made satisfaction for all sins, obtaining for the sinner forgiveness of sins, righteousness that avails before God, and eternal life; Rom. 4:25, 10:4, 1 Cor. 1:30, 2 Cor. 5:21. Its function is to lift up, quicken, and give life to the contrite sinner, Rom. 1:16-17. Read 2 Cor. 3:6f, and see Hymn 289 in *The Lutheran Hymnal*.

The word, Gospel, is used in the Bible in a *broad* sense when it denotes the whole doctrine of Christ, Mark 1:1, 16:15, Acts 20:24. “Gospel” in the broad sense is subdivided into: 1) repentance, and 2) remission of sins, Mark 1:4, Luke 24:46-47, Acts 20:21, (*Epitome of The Formula of Concord*, page 803 in the *Concordia Triglotta*.)

The word, Gospel, is used in a *narrow* (proper) sense when it comprises not the preaching of repentance, but only the preaching of the grace of God, Mark 1:15, (*Thorough Declaration*, page 953.)

The word, Repentance, is used in the Bible in a *broad* sense when it is taken for the entire conversion of man, Luke 13:5, 15:7. But in Mark 1:15, Luke 24:47, Acts 20:21, to repent (*narrow* sense) means only to truly acknowledge sins, to be heartily sorry for them, and to desist from them.

“The Gospel proclaims the forgiveness of sins, not to coarse and secure hearts, but to the bruised or penitent, Luke 4:18. And lest repentance or the terrors of the Law turn into despair, the preaching of the Gospel must be added, that it may be a repentance unto Salvation, 2 Cor. 7:10,” (*Thorough Declaration*, page 955.)

Part Six—The Third Use of the Law

God wants His Law to be used among men in three ways: 1) to curb or discipline wild, disobedient men, 2) to lead men to a knowledge of their sins, a mirroring or hammering function, and 3) to give to the *regenerate*, who still have the old Adam in them, a fixed rule according to which they are to regulate and direct their whole life, a teaching or guiding function.

In 1 Tim. 1:8-9, Gal. 5:18, Paul says that the Law can’t burden with its curse those who have been reconciled to God through Christ. Nevertheless, the regenerate still have the Law written in their hearts, and take pleasure in God’s law “after the inward man,” Rom. 7:22, Psalm 1:2, 119:1.

The sins of believers are completely covered by the perfect obedience of Christ, but believers are not *renewed* in this life perfectly or completely; the old Adam still clings to them, Rom. 7:14-25, Gal. 5:17. The old Adam misleads people into thinking that they are more holy than they are, and so a Christian must study the Law that by its threatening the old Adam might be put down and made obedient to Christ, Psalm 119:71, Rom. 6:12, 1 Cor. 9:27, Gal. 6:14, Heb. 13:21. Likewise, the Law stops the old Adam from embarking on self-chosen programs of so-called holiness, Deut. 12:8,28,32.

The Law can show believers God’s will with regard to good works, Rom. 12:2, Eph. 2:10, but it can never motivate or give any power to perform such works. This only the Holy Ghost can do by renewing the heart-through the preaching of the Gospel, Gal. 3:13-14, Rom. 7:22. With regard to good works, Christians are not under the Law but under grace, Rom. 6:14, governed by the “law of the mind,” Rom 7:23, the “law of

Christ,” 1 Cor. 9:21, Rom. 8:1f. Believers are to produce fruits of the Spirit as if they knew of no command or reward or threat of the Law.

Part Seven—The Lord’s Supper

The chief controversy which made necessary the inclusion of this article in *The Formula of Concord* centered around the question, “What is it that a communicant receives in the Lord’s Supper?” The *Formula* answers, “In the Holy Supper, in, with, and under the bread and wine we receive the body and blood of our Lord for the forgiveness of our sins.” (*Thorough Declaration*, 975, 985.) The words of Scripture on the basis of which this answer is given are recorded in Mat. 26:26-28, Mark 14:22-24, Luke 22:19-20, 1 Cor. 10:16, 11:23-29.

For a full summary of this article of *The Formula of Concord* concerning the Lord’s Supper, the Bible Class student is directed to the *Epitome*, pages 807-817 in the *Triglot Concordia*.

Holding to their rationalistic proposition that the divine attributes of Christ could not be held or contained within the human nature of Christ, the Calvinists and their supporters denied that Christ’s body and blood are actually present and given in the Lord’s Supper. This rationalistic bias also led the Calvinists astray in their treatment of the doctrine of the person of Christ.

Part Eight—The Person of Christ

That Jesus Christ is and remains to all eternity God and man in *one* undivided person is a wonderful “mystery,” 1 Tim. 3:16, upon which our only comfort and salvation depends. A mere man could not pay for the sins of the world, and God as God could not die, but the God-man Jesus Christ did both, Acts 20:28, Rom 5:6-8, 1 Cor. 2:8, 1 Peter 3:18, 4:1, 1 John 1:7.

In opposition to the false teaching that because of His human nature it is impossible for Christ to be present at the same time in more than one place, much less everywhere, with His body, Dr. Martin Luther said that the right hand of God, Eph. 1:20, is everywhere, and what no dimensions of space or time can be impediments for Him Who is the almighty God. See Mat. 18:20, 28:20.

Jesus is *true God* from eternity, Dan. 7:14, Mat. 11:27, 28:18, John 1:1-3, 14:51, 3:35, 5:27, 13:3, 1 Cor. 15:27, Eph. 1:20, Col. 2:3,9. He also had all the physical features, feelings, and attributes of a *man*, Luke 2:52, Gal. 4:4, etc., a true, complete yet sinless (1 Peter 2:22) human nature.

The divine and human natures of Christ are personally united, so that there are not two Christs, but one and the same is the Son of God and the Son of man, Mat. 1:20, Luke 1:35, Rom. 1:3-4, 9:5. This doctrine with all other doctrines can be accepted only by faith in what the Bible says about Christ Jesus, 2 Cor. 10:5.

Part Nine—The Descent of Christ to Hell

The doctrine of Christ’s descent into hell, which is confessed in the Apostles’ Creed, is based on 1 Peter 3:18-20 and Col. 2:15. Luther also drew attention to Psalm 16 and Acts 2:24,27. It was the person of Christ, undivided, Who went to hell. His descent was not the final step in His suffering or humiliation (see John 19:30), but the first step in His triumphant exaltation.

With the *Epitome* (page 827) we say, “It is sufficient that we know that Christ descended into hell, destroyed hell for all believers, and delivered them from the power of death and of the devil, from eternal condemnation and the jaws of hell. But how this occurred we should not curiously investigate but reserve until the other world, where not only this point, but also still others will be revealed, which we here simply believe, and cannot comprehend with our blind reason.”

Part Ten—Church Rites

Ceremonies and church customs which are neither commanded nor forbidden in God’s Word are not in themselves a part of divine worship, Mat. 15:9, and therefore every congregation of believers as it finds necessary may change its ceremonies in an orderly way, 1 Cor. 14:40, to make its worship as edifying as possible for all who participate in it. According to Rom. 14:1,13f and 1 Cor. 8:9-13, Christians who can find

nothing wrong with a certain custom will not offend the weak in faith by insisting on the observance of that custom in the public worship of the congregation.

In times of persecution, or whenever a clear and constant *confession* of the true faith is demanded of us, we should *not* yield even in changing our outward customs or ceremonies (adiaphora) to please those who are challenging any doctrine of the Christian faith, Gal. 5:1, 2:5, 2 Cor. 6:14.

We should not, by adopting the outward *customs* of heterodox churches, cause a visitor at our worship services to think that we must also be in agreement with the *doctrine* of a heterodox congregation or denomination.

Part Eleven—God’s Eternal Foreknowledge and Election

In reference to God’s eternal *foreknowledge*, which extends over the godly and the wicked alike, we say that God knows all things good and evil before they happen, Dan. 2:27-28, Mat. 10:29. We cannot say that, if God knows every future evil ahead of time, He is the *cause* of it, Psalm 5:4. God regulates evil, sets a limit on it, punishes it, and sees to it that the evil experienced by His children can work no lasting harm, Rom. 8:28, 2 Peter 2:9. Satan and the will to do wrong of those who resist God are the cause of all this world’s evil.

In reference to God’s *election* or predestination, which affects only those who are saved or shall yet come to faith, we say that before His creation of the universe, before anyone could do anything to merit salvation, God determined all who would be saved, Rom. 8:29-30, 9:11, Eph. 1:4-6, 2 Tim. 1:9. God’s election, then, is a cause which works and promotes our salvation.

The doctrine of our eternal election is a comfort for those who must endure various adversities or temptations in this life, Is. 14:27, Mat. 16:18, John 10:28, Rom. 8:39, 15:4.

God’s *grace* is *universal*, that is, He earnestly desires to save all people, Ezek. 33:11, Mat-11:28, 23:37, Luke 24:47, John 3:16, 6:37, Rom. 11:32, 1 Tim. 2:4,6, 2 Peter 3:9. It is only by God’s grace that a man is saved, Eph. 2:8, with *no* possibility of a “cooperating will” in conversion, Rom. 11:5-6. From eternity, God the Father decreed that, with the exception of those who acknowledge His Son, Christ, and truly believe in Him, John 6:40, 14:6, Rom. 3:22, He would grant salvation to no one, Mat. 22:3f, Luke 13:23f. .

People ask, “If God wants all to be saved, and if salvation is only by His grace and the faith that He supplies, then why are not all saved?” The Bible teaches that, if a man is lost, he has only himself to blame for his unbelief and resistance against the grace of God, Mat. 22:6, Acts 7:51-53, 13:46, 24:25, Rom. 9:31-33, Heb. 4:7. We understand the “few chosen” in Mat. 20:16, 22:14, to mean all believers, as opposed to all who close their ears to God’s Word, Luke 11:28, Acts 7:57, the means by which God is pleased to work repentance unto salvation, Eph. 1:13, 2 Thes. 2:13. Jesus, “the Word,” John 1:1, is our only Savior; we can come to the Father only by Him, John 6:29,35,39,40,44,64,65,68.

Rationalistic Calvinism answers the question, “Why are some saved and some not?” by teaching that God has two sovereign wills: one a will for the election of some by sovereign decree, and the second a will of damnation for all others by another sovereign decree. Martin Luther replied that then we would have a terrible, arbitrary Lord Who, while speaking of mercy for all, secretly plots the damnation of most of mankind. People would also be tempted to live just to suit themselves if they thought that their salvation or damnation had already been settled with no possibility of change. We should not pry into God's secret counsels. Romans 9:20f, 11:22, 33-36.

Some may turn away from God after believing for a time; Luke 8:13. Their “last state... is worse than the first,” Luke 11:24-26, Eph. 4:30, Heb. 10:26, 2 Peter 2:20. Christians must not become lax in living what they believe; they must, instead, keep on growing in sanctification, making their “calling and election sure,” 2 Peter 1:10.

Part Twelve—Other Heresies and Sects

This article was included in *The Formula of Concord* so that the Lutheran Church at some time in the future would not be charged by the Roman or Reformed Churches with sectarian errors not discussed in the preceding articles of *The Formula of Concord*.

The Anabaptists, rejecting the doctrine of Original Sin, argued that children are not to be baptized until they can confess their faith for themselves. But see Matthew 19:14, 28:19, Acts 16:15,33, 1 Peter 3:21 (emphasis on *save*), and compare with Gal. 3:6-7. and Gen. 21:4. (An eight day old child couldn't *ask* to be included by circumcision in God's covenant of grace with faithful Abraham; nevertheless, infants were made partakers of the covenant blessings by circumcision.)

Baptism by immersion was required by the Anabaptists; but see the use of *baptismous*, "washing ...of tables" (or beds) in Mark 7:4, Luke 11:38. Other errors of the Anabaptists are given in the *Thorough Declaration*, XII.

This article lists the heresies of various other sects in existence in 1577, errors that haven't gone out of style in our day. For a good summary and application of the teaching of part XII of the *Formula*, see Rev. Harold Wicke's article in *The Northwestern Lutheran*, July 23, 1978, pages 233-234.