

# The Narrow Lutheran Middle Road

[A Contemporary and Practical Examination of *Formula of Concord*, Article IV, “Of Good Works” (*Epitome: Triglotta* pgs. 797-801, Kolb & Wengert pgs. 497-500) (*Solid Declaration: Triglotta* pgs. 939-951, Kolb & Wengert pgs. 574-581)]

*Pastor Jeremiah Gumm*

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## **Introduction**

“Boys...always walk the narrow Lutheran middle road.” For those of us who had the privilege of sitting at the feet of Prof. Daniel Deutschlander at Northwestern or Martin Luther College, you couldn’t help but come away from his classes with this statement drilled into your spiritual head. Whether we were translating the works of Gerhard and Stöckhardt in the original German or examining the intricacies of the Thirty Years’ War or digging into the basic truths of God’s Word, Prof. Deutschlander never failed to remind us, “Always walk the narrow Lutheran middle road.”

For a young college student, it was easy to take this statement for granted. Until I entered the public ministry I never realized how profound it was. With this brief statement, Prof. Deutschlander sought to instill in our hearts and heads a fundamental principle of Gospel ministry—a fundamental principle that has held true for every confessional, evangelical<sup>1</sup> minister of the Gospel since the days of the early church. When handling the Word of truth, “always walk the narrow Lutheran middle road.” Otherwise, you will fall into either the deadly trap of legalism on the one side or the equally dangerous whirlpool of antinomianism<sup>2</sup> on the other. Apart from the “narrow Lutheran middle road,” there is no other way to properly carry out the ministry of the Gospel.

This brings us to our subject this morning—a contemporary and practical examination of *Formula of Concord*, Article IV, “Of Good Works”.<sup>3</sup> At first glance, much like I did, you might think this is simply a rehashing of what led to the beginning of the Lutheran Reformation. Perhaps you have images of Niall MacGinnis or Joe Fiennes in their respective roles as Martin Luther dramatically announcing, “Here I stand!” or pounding a large role of parchment to an old wooden church door. As interesting as a simple review of Lutheran history would be, however, the writer of Ecclesiastes reminds us, “***There is nothing new under the sun.***”<sup>4</sup> The Rick Warrens and John Paul IIs of our day are really no different than the Philipp Melanchthons and Paul IIIs of Chemnitz’ day. It is as necessary for us today to walk the “narrow Lutheran middle road” regarding good works as it was for our Lutheran forefathers who penned the words for our consideration this morning. May the God of all grace bless and be with us that like trees planted by streams of water we may bear abundant fruit!

## ***The History of Formula of Concord, Article IV, “Of Good Works”***

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<sup>1</sup> “Evangelical” not in the sense of today’s Arminian-Baptist-Calvinist branch of Christianity, but in the original sense—the biblical sense—of “Gospel-centered”, much like the “middle name” of many of our congregations.

<sup>2</sup> The term *antinomian* or some form of it will be used frequently in this paper. Therefore a definition is in order. Dr. John Brug in a recent *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* article defines *antinomianism* as “any view that sets aside any stipulation of God’s law. There are two main forms of antinomianism: the kind that grants license for gross immorality and the kind that claims that the Christian does not need the law since he is guided by the Spirit or by the gospel.” (John Brug, “Foreword to Volume 103: Scylla and Charybdis,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*. Winter 2006: 3.).

<sup>3</sup> The text of the *Formula of Concord* used in this essay is taken from *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 2000. This critical edition is now recommended for use in the Symbolics course at MLC and the Formula of Concord course at WLS. Citations, however, will include references from both the Kolb & Wengert critical edition and the *Triglotta* for ease of use.

<sup>4</sup> Ecclesiastes 1:9.

Luther's bones were barely cold when the Lutheran leaders began to abandon the "narrow Lutheran middle road". In the summer of 1548, Duke Moritz<sup>5</sup> was elector of Saxony after betraying his fellow Lutheran and cousin, Elector John Frederick of Saxony. To gain power, Moritz had aligned himself with the Roman Catholic forces of Emperor Charles V and King Ferdinand in the Smalcald War of 1546-1547. The Roman Catholic rulers promised he would not have to abandon his religious faith, but after their crushing success, they demanded he follow their anti-Lutheran religious policy known as the *Augsburg Interim*. Under pressure from those in power as well as the Lutheran populace back home, Moritz proposed a compromise document. His advisors worked with a number of the Wittenberg theologians, namely Philipp Melanchthon, "to formulate a statement of faith and practice that would seem to comply with the policies of the *Augsburg Interim* while still preserving a doctrine of justification that faithfully conveyed Luther's teaching."<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately the final draft of this document, known as the *Leipzig Interim*, left a great deal of ambiguous language regarding justification, especially its notable omission of the biblical concept of *sola fide*.

This document became the source of controversy for many of the articles of the *Formula of Concord*, including Article IV, "Of Good Works." In the *Leipzig Interim* regarding good works, it states, "Just as the true knowledge must enlighten us, so it is certainly true that these virtues, faith, love, hope, and others, must be in us and are necessary for salvation... Because the virtues and good works please God, as has been said, so they merit reward in this life, both spiritual and temporal, according to God's plan, and more reward in eternal life on the basis of the divine promise."<sup>7</sup>

If this document was meant to preserve Luther's teaching of justification, then how could they confess good works "are necessary for salvation", which if taken literally would be the very antithesis of *sola fide*? To find the source of this seeming return to Roman Catholic work-righteousness, we need to go back to Melanchthon's 1535 edition of his *Loci Communes*, where he writes, "Nevertheless good works are necessary to eternal life, inasmuch as they must necessarily follow reconciliation."<sup>8</sup> At first glance, it seems Melanchthon sought to prevent the view that grace is cheap and therefore the regenerate man can lead a reckless life. Unfortunately as Melanchthon defended his statement, it became more than a defense against "cheap grace". To him "good works were *essential* to salvation, that is, as a contributing factor or cause; for if they were absent, he argued than no man could be saved."<sup>9</sup> Probably what Melanchthon should have said was "good works are the necessary *fruit* of justifying faith"<sup>10</sup>. In spite of repeated warnings from Luther about using the misleading phraseology, however, Philipp only admitted it could be misunderstood, not wrong in itself. By the time of the Interims after Luther's death, Philipp Melanchthon, displaying no confessional backbone, was willing to support and uphold his statement regarding good works, even though he opposed the Roman Catholic teaching that good works merit salvation. If only he would have admitted the faulty theology in his statement!<sup>11</sup>

Philipp's followers, such as Caspar Cruciger,<sup>12</sup> took up his cause regarding good works even before Luther's death, but after the *Leipzig Interim* they became much more vocal. Among these students of Melanchthon, one came to the fore as the loudest proponent of the "good works are necessary for salvation" camp—George Major. "Since no one was ever saved without good works, thus good works are necessary for

<sup>5</sup> Also known as "Maurice".

<sup>6</sup> Robert Kolb, tr. "The Leipzig Interim," *Sources and Contexts of the Book of Concord*, eds. Robert Kolb and James A. Nestingen. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001) 183.

<sup>7</sup> Kolb 190. Also F. Bente. "Historical Introductions to the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church," *Concordia Triglotta*, ed. F. Bente. (St. Louis: CPH, 1921) 107 (Sec. 136 A).

<sup>8</sup> Bente 113 (Sec. 142 A). "*Et tamen bona opera ita necessaria sunt ad vitam aeternam, quia sequi reconciliationem necessario debent.*"

<sup>9</sup> Eugene F. Klug and Otto F. Stahlke, "Of Good Works," *Getting into the Formula of Concord: A History & Digest of the Formula*, (St. Louis: CPH, 1977) 38. (Emphasis Klug & Stahlke's)

<sup>10</sup> As can be found, for example, in Luke 7:47, 50 and Ephesians 2:8-10

<sup>11</sup> Klug 38-39.

<sup>12</sup> See Bente 113-114 (Sec. 142) for an in-depth look at the battles between Cruciger, Cordatus and Amsdorf on this topic.

salvation!”<sup>13</sup> Major promoted Melanchthon’s wording, not because works “merit or effect forgiveness of sins...but in order that salvation, achieved by grace, might be preserved and not lost by disobedience. So, such works were necessary, if salvation was to be retained.”<sup>14</sup> He even went so far as to say, “And I declare publicly and with clear and plain words that no one is saved by evil works, and also that no is saved without good works. Furthermore I say, let him who teaches otherwise, even though an angel from heaven, be accursed!”<sup>15</sup>

This brought heavy criticism from both sides because the central article of Scripture was at stake—the sinner’s justification before God. Nicolaus von Amsdorf, Matthias Flacius, and even Melanchthon quickly pointed out Major was “detracting from God’s grace and Christ’s meritorious sacrifice”<sup>16</sup>, but like Melanchthon, Major only revised his statement. Without a retraction George Major and the Philippists wandered farther from the “narrow Lutheran middle road” and quickly down the path of Roman Catholic process justification. “Thus by faith and the Holy Ghost we, indeed, *begin to be justified*, sanctified, and saved, but we are not yet *perfectly justified*, sanctified, and saved. It remains, therefore, that we become *perfectly just and saved*.”<sup>17</sup> Major defended this position until his death in 1574.

The debate raged over the term “necessary”. Major’s opponents stated it was only harmless as long as good works were seen as “fruits of faith”. Some in the Antinomian camp objected to the necessity of good works at all, since they were to be done “freely and out of love” and the Law no longer plays a role in the Christian’s life.<sup>18</sup> Into this mix jumped a supporter of Major and fellow student of Melanchthon—Justus Menius. He made a slight revision to Major’s original wording, but his statement was no less damning because he, like Major, fell into the trap of process justification. “He [the Holy Spirit] begins righteousness and life in the believers, which beginning is in this life (as long as we dwell on earth in this sinful flesh) very weak and imperfect, *but nevertheless necessary to salvation*, and will be perfect after the resurrection, that we may walk in it before God eternally and be saved.... Sanctification, or renewal of the Holy Spirit, is necessary to salvation.”<sup>19</sup>

Most Lutheran theologians opposed Major and Menius, von Amsdorf and Flacius as the most vocal of the Gnesio-Lutherans. In the heat of the controversy, however, von Amsdorf—the old confidant of Luther—inadvertently swung to the other side of the controversy and claimed, “Good works are harmful to salvation.” Von Amsdorf surely meant good works are harmful when they are seen as the source for salvation, but his statement was never that clear. His lack of clarity brought opposition from Flacius and Melanchthon alike.

In response to the extreme lack of clarity or falsehood on both sides of the biblical teaching of good works, with surprising brevity the writers of the *Formula of Concord* soundly condemned these poorly worded statements and settled the issue. By God’s grace, they guided the Evangelical Lutheran Church back to the “narrow Lutheran middle road.”

### ***The Theology of Formula of Concord, Article IV, “Of Good Works”***

The writers of the *Formula of Concord* had to walk the “narrow Lutheran middle road” very carefully when they wrote Article IV, for to deviate from the course in any way would result in spiritual destruction. The precision of their language is astounding as you read this article, especially because of the nuances of the word “necessary”. In spite of these subtleties, the reader still comes away with a clear picture of where the Lutheran church and, most importantly, God’s Word stands on “good works”.

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<sup>13</sup> Daniel Deutschlander, “The Majoristic Controversy.” Class lecture. German 3021. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, MN. Date Unknown.

<sup>14</sup> Klug 39.

<sup>15</sup> Bente 115 (Sec. 144B).

<sup>16</sup> Klug 39.

<sup>17</sup> Bente 117 (Sec. 145D). Emphasis Bente’s.

<sup>18</sup> Klug 41.

<sup>19</sup> Bente 118 (Sec. 146C). Emphasis Bente’s.

Article IV begins with the *status controversiae* that led to the creation of this article. We have examined those in depth in the preceding section, but in good order we review with the concordists the basic points of controversy under examination.

1. The Overestimation of Good Works – “Good works are necessary for salvation...It is impossible to be saved without good works...No one is saved apart from good works.”<sup>20</sup> (This was the position of George Major, Philipp Melancthon and their followers.)
2. The Underestimation of Good Works – “Good works are harmful for salvation.” (This was Nicolaus von Amsdorf’s poorly worded position.) “[G]ood works are performed not by necessity, but freely, because they are not coerced by the fear and punishment of the law but rather flow from a free spirit and joyous heart.” “[N]ew obedience in the reborn is not necessary.”<sup>21</sup> (This was the position of the Antinomians.)
3. The “Narrow Lutheran Middle Road” – Good works are “necessary” as fruits of faith and not “harmful” for the Christian, but never “necessary” for salvation, nor its preservation. (This was the common position of Amsdorf, Flacius, and the primary writers of the *Formula of Concord*.)

As in every doctrinal discussion, we continue in the same spirit of the writers. “To explain this disagreement in a Christian manner and according to the guidance of God’s Word, and, by God’s grace, to arrive at a complete settlement, we believe, teach, and confess as follows...”<sup>22</sup> Amazingly enough among all the heat of controversy, there were actually points of perfect agreement! The writers lay these out in short order in the *Solid Declaration*.

1. Good works are expected of the Christian. – “[I]t is God’s will, order, and command that believers shall walk in good works...”<sup>23</sup>
2. Good works are defined as those commanded by God and empowered by the Holy Spirit. “[T]rue good works are not those which people invent for themselves or that take their form according to human tradition but rather are those that God himself has prescribed and commanded in his Word...[T]rue good works are not performed out of our own natural powers, but they are performed when a person is reconciled with God through faith and renewed through the Holy Spirit, or, as Paul says, ‘created’ anew, ‘in Christ Jesus for good works’ [Eph 2:10].”<sup>24</sup>
3. Good works, though imperfectly motivated and performed, are accepted before God because of the merit of Christ. – “There is also no argument about how and why believers’ good works are pleasing and acceptable to God, even though they are impure and imperfect in this flesh. We agree that this is so for the sake of the Lord Christ through faith, because the person is acceptable to God... For a person must be acceptable to God beforehand (and that alone because of Christ), before that person’s works are at all pleasing to him.”<sup>25</sup>
4. Good works only grow out of faith. – “Therefore, faith must be the mother and the source of those truly good and God-pleasing works, which God wants to reward in this world and the next. For this reason St. Paul calls them true fruits of faith or of the Spirit [Gal. 5:22; Eph. 5:9].”<sup>26</sup>

The final statement of agreement includes a lengthy, yet beautiful description of the role of faith as the “mother and the source of those truly good and God-pleasing works” from Dr. Luther’s preface to Romans. In

<sup>20</sup> Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 574.1. (*Triglotta* 939.1)

<sup>21</sup> KW 575.3, 575.5 & *Triglotta* 939.3.

<sup>22</sup> KW 575.6 & *Triglotta* 939.6.

<sup>23</sup> KW 575.7 & *Triglotta* 939/941.7.

<sup>24</sup> KW 575.8 & *Triglotta* 941.8.

<sup>25</sup> KW 575.8 & *Triglotta* 941.8.

<sup>26</sup> KW 576.9 & *Triglotta* 941.9.

this description, Luther clearly describes the confidence of Christian faith in God's grace, which motivates the believer to perform good works without compulsion and even without thought. Good works do not make one a Christian, but his Christian faith makes good works. The two are so intimately connected "...it is impossible to separate works from faith, quite as impossible as to separate heat and light from fire."<sup>27</sup>

From this point forward in the *Solid Declaration* the concordists lay out four major points under dispute and how they are related. The first point addresses the position of the Antinomians, who contended good works or the new obedience as not necessary for the believer, but performed of his own free will, if at all. They contended a Christian could have true faith and "intentionally continue in sinful deeds."<sup>28</sup> The ten affirmative theses of Article IV in the *Epitome*, as well as paragraphs 14-20 of the *Solid Declaration* clearly stand against this "Epicurean security" of the Antinomians.<sup>29</sup>

Are good works ever "necessary" for the Christian? Holy Scripture<sup>30</sup> uses words like "necessity," "necessary," "necessarily," "should", and "must" to describe God's will or command for the Christian. In a similar way the *Augsburg Confession*<sup>31</sup> and the *Apology*<sup>32</sup> use similar expressions like "it is necessary to do good works, which necessarily should follow faith and reconciliation" and "it is necessary that we should do and must do the good works that God commands."<sup>33</sup> From these references, the reader can see that although works are never "necessary" for salvation, they are still "necessary" for the Christian life. How is that possible? It is only possible through the intimate connection between faith and good works that Dr. Luther had described.

The Antinomians, however, contended one could have faith "which exists without repentance or good works."<sup>34</sup> On the basis of Scripture, the concordists had a field day with this contention. They compare the Antinomian teaching of having true faith and righteousness while remaining in intentional sin to one of Luther's favorite pictures describing good works—a fruit tree that is supposed to bear good fruit, although it is "a rotten, unfruitful tree that bears no good fruits..."<sup>35</sup> For anyone who has ever had a fruit tree, you know it is an agricultural impossibility and when applied to the spiritual realm, the impossibility goes much further. "As if true faith and the evil intention to remain and continue in sin could exist in a single heart at the same time!"<sup>36</sup>

The Lutheran writers add one note for clarity. When the word "necessary" is used in Scripture and the Confessions, it is not to be understood with the idea of coercion or force, but "only as the order of the unchangeable will of God, to which we are bound."<sup>37</sup> For if good works were "necessary" in the sense of coercion and against the person's will, then would they really be good? No! They would be mere hypocritical works, of which the Lord wants nothing as the *Formula* is quick to cite.<sup>38</sup> The Lord instead desires willing believers to obey his commands cheerfully. Note the subtle difference between the Lutheran position of commands carried out joyfully by willing people and the Antinomian position of random acts of kindness carried out at will by joyful people.

The question then arose, "How spontaneous are good works?" With reference to Paul's letters, where he speaks of the spiritual struggle within, the Lutheran theologians determined that the Christian as a reborn child of God can be willing to "delight in the law of God", yet is always in a struggle with the flesh, which is "unwilling and reluctant".<sup>39</sup> Because of this spiritual struggle that continues until death or the Lord's return, the Lutheran theologians rejected the Antinomian position. "But we reject and condemn as false the view that good

<sup>27</sup> KW 576.10-12 & *Triglotta* 941.10-12.

<sup>28</sup> Willard Dow Allbeck., *Studies in the Lutheran Confessions* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1952) 265.

<sup>29</sup> KW 498-499.5-12 & *Triglotta* 797/799.5-15.

<sup>30</sup> Ro 13:5-6,9; 1 Co 9:9; Ac 5:29; Jn 15:12; 1 Jn 4:11.

<sup>31</sup> Articles VI & XX.

<sup>32</sup> Article IV:141,189,200,214.

<sup>33</sup> KW 576.14 & *Triglotta* 943.14.

<sup>34</sup> KW 577.15 & *Triglotta* 943.15.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> KW 577.16 & *Triglotta* 943.16.

<sup>38</sup> Psalm 110:3; Psalm 54:6; 2 Corinthians 9:7; Romans 6:17.

<sup>39</sup> KW 577.19-20 & *Triglotta* 945.19-20.

works are a matter of freedom for the faithful, in the sense that they have free choice whether they want or wish to do them or refrain from doing them or even to act against God’s law while nevertheless still retaining faith, God’s favor, and grace.”<sup>40</sup>

With their rejection of the Antinomian position, the Lutheran theologians turn their attention to the Romanist statements of Major and Melancthon. From the start of this surprisingly brief reaction to their statements, the concordists make it clear where the “narrow Lutheran middle road” could be found. “Here we must take great care not to draw works into the article of justification and salvation and mix them in with it.”<sup>41</sup> The writers then lay out the compelling Scriptural reasons why the proposition that good works are necessary for salvation must be rejected.

First of all, these Romanist statements totally contradict St. Paul’s expressions that “completely exclude our works and merit from the article on justification and salvation and ascribe everything to God’s grace and the merit of Christ alone...”<sup>42</sup> Not only do these statements contradict Scripture, but they also have a powerfully negative impact on souls, moving them to leave the “narrow Lutheran middle road” for the paths of despair or self-righteousness. “Likewise, these [propositions] regarding the necessity of good works for salvation deprive troubled, distressed consciences of the comfort of the gospel, give them reason to doubt, and are in many ways dangerous. On the other hand, they strengthen the presumptuousness of one’s own righteousness and the trust in one’s own works.”<sup>43</sup>

For a moment, consider the implications if good works were a cause of salvation. As the concordists are quick to point out, we would all be doomed. As they stated in Articles I and II, “man is corrupt in all that he does, therefore even in our best works we sin.”<sup>44</sup> What single good work could man possibly produce that is not weighted down with weakness or the flesh? As long as man carries around the flesh—that damned sinner he will carry around until the day he dies—there will always be a hindrance to good works. Contrary to the points of Major and Melancthon, in no way can sinful man perform even one perfect good work that in any way contributes to salvation.

Another reason the Lutheran writers sound the warning about these “ambiguous” statements is the reality that these statements are simply a return to the papists, who had used these ideas to their advantage over souls. How sad that within one generation the Lutheran church was already becoming heretical with the infusion of work-righteousness into the doctrine of justification! To combat this horrible error, the Lutheran theologians had to go *ad fontes Scripturae* and quoted St. Paul, “Salvation belongs only to those to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works.”<sup>45</sup> The concordists continue with references to *Augsburg Confession* Article VI and a sampling of Dr. Luther’s many writings against the mixture of works in the article of justification. What else could they do than reject Major’s and Melancthon’s attempt to return the Lutheran Church to the Roman Catholic fold? “It is proper for our churches to continue to insist that these ways of speaking are not to be taught, defended, or tolerated, but should be excluded and rejected by our church as false and improper. These [propositions] were revived once again and drawn into public discussion during the time of persecution flowing out of the Interim, when above all a clear, correct confession against every kind of corruption and alteration of the article on justification was necessary.”<sup>46</sup>

The writers now turn their attention to a closer examination of the legalistic teaching that good works are necessary to preserve salvation and righteousness before God. In the process they make it clear how the Lord preserves righteousness and salvation in his people. Although this concept of works preserving salvation

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> KW 578.22 & *Triglotta* 945.22.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* The *Formula* refers to the teachings “*de particulis exclusivis in articulo iustificationis et salvationis*”—those particular expressions in Scripture that refer to the article of justification and salvation.

<sup>43</sup> KW 578.23 & *Triglotta* 945.23.

<sup>44</sup> Deutschlander Lecture.

<sup>45</sup> *Formula of Concord* translation. NASB translation: “Just as David speaks of the blessing on the man whom God credits righteousness apart from works.” In German the word for “salvation” is *Seligkeit*. This word is also translated literally “blessedness”. These multiple definitions led to some confusion on the definition of “salvation” during this controversy.

<sup>46</sup> KW 578.29 & *Triglotta* 947.29.

flows from Roman Catholic theology, it is intriguing to see that the first false teaching the Lutheran theologians address in this section is not from the legalist camp, but the Antinomian camp.<sup>47</sup> In his own way the Lord again reminds us old false teachings do not disappear, but are simply packaged differently. Paragraph 31 of Article IV is a clear rejection of the modern-day Evangelical teaching, “Once saved, always saved”. Some things never change!

Therefore, we must begin by diligently condemning and rejecting this false Epicurean delusion that some dream up, that faith and the righteousness and salvation we have received cannot be lost through any arrogant and intentional sin or evil work but rather that when Christians follow evil lusts without any fear and shame, resist the Holy Spirit, and intentionally proceed to sin against their consciences, they nonetheless at the same time retain faith, God’s grace, righteousness, and salvation.<sup>48</sup>

How do they reject this awful error? They return to the fountain of Scripture. They point to no less than six different “divine threats of punishment and admonitions” for God’s people.<sup>49</sup> “Once saved, always saved” is not possible in the face of these threats. The writers follow up with a reference to Article XX, Paragraph 13 of the *Apology*, where Melancthon comments on 2 Peter 1:10, which was a passage the papists had actually used in the *Confutation* to defend their teaching that good works merit the forgiveness of sins<sup>50</sup>. In the process Melancthon refutes the notion that a Christian is “once saved, always saved”.

Peter teaches why people should do good works: namely, to confirm our calling, that is, that we may not fall away from our calling by lapsing again into sin. Do good works, he says, so that you may remain in your heavenly calling, so that you do not fall back into sin and lose the Spirit and his gifts, which you have received, not because of the works which follow from faith, but because of faith itself through Christ. These works are preserved through faith. However, faith does not remain in those who lead a sinful life, lose the Holy Spirit, and reject repentance.<sup>51</sup>

The question arises, “Does this then mean that good works preserve salvation and righteousness before God?” Based on the *Apology* quote, you would almost think that faith gets righteousness and salvation started with good works taking over to preserve what was started, but that is not the case. The concordists go back to Scripture once again, especially the writings of Paul, where he not only attributes to faith “the access to grace but also the basis for our standing in grace... That is, he attributes everything—the beginning, middle, and end—to faith alone.”<sup>52</sup>

On the basis of these *sola fide* passages, the Lutheran theologians declare, “It is clear from God’s Word that faith is the only real means through which righteousness and salvation not only are received but also are preserved by God.” The *Formula* rejects the decrees of the Council of Trent<sup>53</sup> and anyone else who supports the

<sup>47</sup> Dr. John Brug concludes a recent examination of legalism and antinomianism (“Foreword to Volume 103: Scylla and Charybdis”, *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Winter 2006: 3) with an intriguing section entitled “Fraternal Twins”, in which he points out like the *Formula* writers that legalism and antinomianism, “are simply sliding positions on a spectrum of lawlessness.... Every legalist is a selective antinomian.... Every antinomian is a selective legalist.... Neither retains the gospel as what it really is—the gracious declaration, not of what we are to do, but of what Christ has done.” 8-9.

<sup>48</sup> KW 579.31 & *Triglotta* 947.31.

<sup>49</sup> KW 579.32 & *Triglotta* 947.32. The references are 1 Corinthians 6:9-10; Galatians 5:21; Ephesians 5:5; Romans 8:13; Colossians 3:6 and Ephesians 5:6.

<sup>50</sup> Kolb 118. When one considers the Roman Catholic text for their defense was the Vulgate, their position is understandable—no less erroneous, but at least understandable. The Latin text for 2 Peter 1:10 is *Quapropter fratres magis satagite ut per bona opera certam vestram vocationem, et electionem faciatis: haec enim faciatis, non peccabitis aliquando*. The 4<sup>th</sup> Revised Edition of *The Greek New Testament* does not include the underlined phrase translated as “through good works” in the main text, but cites it as one variation in the notes below.

<sup>51</sup> KW 579.33 & *Triglotta* 947/949.33.

<sup>52</sup> KW 580.34 & *Triglotta* 949.34. The references are Romans 5:2 & 11:20; Colossians 1:22-23; and 1 Peter 1:5,9.

<sup>53</sup> Council of Trent, Session VI <<http://www.catholic-forum.com/saints/trent06.htm>>:

idea that “good works preserve salvation or that our works either completely or only in part preserve and maintain the righteousness received by faith or even faith itself.”<sup>54</sup> They reject the use of these statements that good works preserve salvation and righteousness because the papist error had led to a great deal of quarreling and offense in the church. For this reason, much like the statement, “good works are necessary for salvation,” the writers advise the future use of clear language based on sound biblical teaching as opposed to the ambiguous language of the past.

Article IV concludes with a brief rejection of Amsdorf’s erroneous statement, “Good works are harmful to salvation.” This statement can only be true “if people want to draw good works into the article on justification and base their righteousness or confidence in salvation upon it and thereby want to merit God’s grace and become saved...”<sup>55</sup> Unfortunately, Amsdorf’s statement came out in the heat of controversy in order to overturn the teaching “good works are necessary for salvation.”<sup>56</sup>

To consider all good works as harmful to salvation is a denial of what Scripture says about good works. As we have seen over and over again, “...it is God’s will and express command that the faithful should do good works, which the Holy Spirit effects in the faithful, so God allows these works to please him for Christ’s sake and promises a glorious reward for them in this life and in the life to come.”<sup>57</sup> Therefore the *Formula* rejects and condemns Amsdorf’s statement if it is left without explanation. In regard to this point the *Epitome* makes a statement worth noting that shows true concern for souls and the importance of walking the “narrow Lutheran middle road” in regards to good works.

For particularly in these last times it is no less necessary to admonish the people to Christian discipline and good works and to remind them how necessary it is that they practice good works as a demonstration of their faith and their gratitude to God than it is to admonish them that works not be mingled with the article on justification. For people can be damned by an Epicurean delusion about faith just as much as by the papistic, Pharisaic trust in their own works and merit.<sup>58</sup>

### **Applying *Formula of Concord*, Article IV, “Of Good Works”**

Now that we have plowed through the history and theology of Article IV, you might be asking, “So how does this apply to my ministry?” In my personal study of Article IV, I was amazed to discover how many present-day applications could be found in such a relatively short section. Many tie into future articles of the *Formula of Concord*, which God-willing, we will consider another day. For the purpose of time, we will consider a couple major applications that come from this article. Even as we take a look at these applications, however, we will see how challenging it is to walk the “narrow Lutheran middle road” in 21<sup>st</sup> Century North America.

### **Application #1: Seeing the Errors Today – The Wayward Highways of Roman Catholicism & ELCA**

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**Canon 24:** If anyone says that the justice received is not preserved and also not increased before God through good works, but that those works are merely the fruits and signs of justification obtained, but not the cause of its increase, let him be anathema.

**Canon 32:** If anyone says that the good works of the one justified are in such manner the gifts of God that they are not also the good merits of him justified; or that the one justified by the good works that he performs by the grace of God and the merit of Jesus Christ, whose living member he is, does not truly merit an increase of grace, eternal life, and in case he dies in grace, the attainment of eternal life itself and also an increase of glory, let him be anathema.

<sup>54</sup> KW 580.35 & *Triglotta* 949.35.

<sup>55</sup> KW 580.37 & *Triglotta* 949.37.

<sup>56</sup> Interestingly enough, out of respect for this elderly defender of the faith and in the realization that this was simply an unclear, foolish statement, the writers denounce the error, but refrain from anathematizing the author.

<sup>57</sup> KW 580-581.38 & *Triglotta* 951.38.

<sup>58</sup> KW 499.18 & *Triglotta* 801.18.



You do not have to go far to find the errors rejected in Article IV.<sup>59</sup> In fact, the one group whose teachings were most rejected by that article has yet to change its stance 526 years later. Yes, the Roman Catholic Church has made some changes in the externals, but their theology remains the same. Vatican II reaffirmed the decrees of the Council of Trent. Pope John Paul II sought to make them easier for mass consumption in the second edition of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, but the doctrine remains the same. According to Roman Catholic theology, good works are still necessary for salvation.

The merit of man before God in the Christian life arises from the fact that God *has freely chosen to associate man with the work of his grace*. The fatherly action of God is first on his own initiative, and then follows man's free acting through his collaboration, so that the merit of good works is to be attributed in the first place to the grace of God, then to the faithful....Since the initiative belongs to God in the order of grace, *no one can merit the initial grace* of forgiveness and justification, at the beginning of conversion. Moved by the Holy Spirit and by charity, *we can then merit* for ourselves and for others the graces needed for our sanctification, for the increase of grace and charity, and for the attainment of eternal life....The children of our holy mother the Church rightly hope for *the grace of final perseverance and the recompense* of God their Father for the good works accomplished with his grace in communion with Jesus."<sup>60</sup>

Nothing has really changed when it comes to Roman Catholicism, but in the compromising spirit of Philipp Melancthon (for whom it should be named); the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) has forsaken the "narrow Lutheran middle road" in favor of the work-righteous, process justification of the Roman Catholic Church. Only two years after John Paul II edited the words above, leaders from the ELCA were extending the hand of fellowship to leaders from the Roman Catholic Church through their so-called *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*. Sadly, in favor of outward unity, the ELCA abandoned the Scriptural road of their forebears to turn down the Roman Catholic highway to hell. It is truly sad to see how far the ELCA leaders were willing to alter word definitions and seek out "intended meanings" to make it possible.

According to Catholic understanding, good works, made possible by grace and the working of the Holy Spirit, contribute to growth in grace, so that the righteousness that comes from God is preserved and communion with Christ is deepened. When Catholics affirm the "meritorious" character of good works, they wish to say that, according to the biblical witness, a reward in heaven is promised to these works. Their intention is to emphasize the responsibility of persons for their actions, not to contest the character of those works as gifts, or far less to deny that justification always remains the unmerited gift of grace. The concept of a preservation of grace and a growth in grace and faith is also held by Lutherans.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>59</sup> For my congregation—Cross of Christ in Liverpool, NY—examples of the errors refuted in Article IV can be found less than ½ a mile to the north (St. John's Catholic Church) & ½ a mile to the west (King of Kings Lutheran Church—ELCA). Oddly enough, we are right in the middle!

<sup>60</sup> John Paul II, ed. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1997) #2008/2010/2016, 541-542. Emphasis John Paul II's.

<sup>61</sup> *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*. 31 October 1999.

<<http://www.elca.org/ecumenical/ecumenicaldialogue/romancatholic/jddj/declaration.html>> Below are the resources that went into this article of the JDDJ. They are theologically sickening to say the least.

- "But the Council excludes the possibility of earning grace - that is, justification - (can. 2; DS 1552) and bases the earning or merit of eternal life on the gift of grace itself, through membership in Christ (can. 32:DS 1582). Good works are 'merits' as a gift. Although the Reformers attack 'Godless trust' in one's own works, the Council explicitly excludes any notion of a claim or any false security (cap. 16: DS 1548f). It is evident ..that the Council wishes to establish a link with Augustine, who introduced the concept of merit, in order to express the responsibility of human beings, in spite of the 'bestowed' character of good works" (LV:E 66).

- If we understand the language of "cause" in Canon 24 in more personal terms, as it is done in chapter 16 of the Decree on Justification, where the idea of communion with Christ is foundational, then we can describe the Catholic doctrine on merit as it is done in the first sentence of the second paragraph of 4.7: growth in grace, perseverance in righteousness received from God and a deeper communion with Christ. - "Many antitheses could be overcome if the misleading word 'merit' were simply to be viewed and thought about in connection with the true sense of the biblical term 'wage' or reward" (LV:E 67).

Since the time of this ecumenical attempt at outward unity, the ELCA has only progressed farther down the path of Roman Catholicism's work-righteous, process justification. For this reason, it is wise for us to heed the warnings of our Lutheran forebears regarding this error still today. How awful the impact this error still has on souls! How often we run into souls who are on the brink of despair because of this error! To echo the words of the *Formula*, "...it is proper for our churches to continue to insist that these ways of speaking are not to be taught, defended, or tolerated, but should be excluded and rejected by our churches as false and improper."<sup>62</sup>

#### Application #2: Moving the Members – Preaching & Teaching Sanctification

Do your people ever seem spiritually lethargic? Do you see individuals getting caught in the same sins of weakness and ignorance time and time again? Do you ever find yourself in that situation? Do you ever wonder, "How can I motivate these people to live as children of God?" If you are serving in this world, then chances are pretty good you have or will encounter these situations.

There are a couple different routes you can take. Unfortunately most roads either return to Antinomian Avenue or Legalist Lane. For example, you can take the golden how-to highway to successful sanctification, which can be possible in only forty days (or seven steps or fifteen points). To get your people to be "purpose-driven" is attractive. To get them to analyze their purpose for living has its benefits, but when it comes to motivating our members, is the Rick Warren approach really the best way to teach sanctification?

As helpful as some of his advice or the advice of various other "how-to" guides is, they largely offer "purpose-driven law, not promise-driven gospel".<sup>63</sup> All these lists of principles and purposes, though watered down, are still Law. They end up burdening consciences or creating hypocritical works. They end up emphasizing sanctification over justification. So how do we motivate God's people to do "good works" without overemphasizing or forcing those "good works" out of those people? What else can we do than walk the "narrow Lutheran middle road" between justification and sanctification? We find our motivation not in what Christ can do in us, but what Christ has done for us. Harold Senkbeil once wrote,

This is the scriptural relationship between justification and sanctification; it avoids two equally dangerous extremes. Whenever guilty consciences are directed to the inner life for certainty of salvation, faith is immediately in jeopardy, because the Spirit's work inside the Christian is always hampered by the sinful nature. Our sinful nature, St. Paul wrote, has not a single inclination toward good: "I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my flesh" (Romans 7:18).

On the other hand, when faith is held to have no connection with life and the sanctifying power of the Spirit is denied, God's gift of grace is robbed of its power. Thus James can conclude: "As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead" (James 2:26).<sup>64</sup>

The emphasis on sanctification has ebbed and flowed over the years. In the decades after the *Book of Concord* was published, sanctification was emphasized less and less. In the late 17<sup>th</sup> Century, the emphasis changed as the Pietistic movement sprang up. Sanctification and the "inner life" of the Christian were emphasized to the exclusion of justification. In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the emphasis swung the other way with a renewed emphasis on justification as confessional Lutheranism took root in America, but in the last half

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- "The Lutheran confessions stress that the justified person is responsible not to lose the grace received but to live in it ..Thus the confessions can speak of a preservation of grace and a growth in it. If righteousness in Canon 24 is understood in the sense that it affects human beings, then it does not strike to us. But if 'righteousness' in Canon 24 refers to the Christian's acceptance by God, it strikes to us; for this righteousness is always perfect; compared with it the works of Christians are only 'fruits' and 'signs'" (VELKD 94,2-14). - "Concerning Canon 26, we refer to the Apology where eternal life is described as reward: '..We grant that eternal life is a reward because it is something that is owed - not because of our merits but because of the promise'" (VELKD 94,20-24)"

<<http://www.elca.org/ecumenical/ecumenicaldialogue/romancatholic/jddj/resources.htm>>

<sup>62</sup> KW 578.29 & *Triglotta* 947.29.

<sup>63</sup> John Schuetze. "Judge a Book by Its Cover." *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* .103:2 (Spring 2006): 127.

<sup>64</sup> Harold Senkbeil. *Sanctification: Christ in Action*. (Milwaukee:NPH, 2002): 113-114.

century, especially with the rise of the Evangelical movement, the emphasis is swinging back almost to the point of overemphasis.

It is tempting to swing with the pendulum. Unfortunately, the religious air we and our members breathe in this nation, at least, is of the Evangelical kind, but preaching and teaching sanctification while downplaying or underemphasizing justification is only a return to Pietism. We preach the one, but do not leave the other unproclaimed. We proclaim Christ for us, but do not hesitate to proclaim Christ in us.

As spiritual descendants of those who wrote the *Formula of Concord*, we, also, need to take a careful look at the role of good works in our preaching and teaching. How balanced are the messages we preach and teach in our church body and in our individual congregations? Is there too much emphasis either way? How can we improve or be more specific? In our church body or congregation is there greater emphasis on one particular area of sanctification, such as stewardship, to the detriment of others? If so, how can that change? Are we properly equipping God's people for works of service? How can we equip parents to teach their children the role of good works in their lives? How do we model and teach the importance of sanctification as we teach young and old alike? All questions worth our own personal consideration. May we, like the concordists, not neglect the role of good works in our preaching and teaching, but still keep the proper balance between proclaiming justification and sanctification!

### Discussion Questions

1. Those who defended Melancthon's original statement, including Philipp himself, often made changes in the way they stated their doctrine. Amsdorf was strongly admonished for the lack of clarity in his statements. Describe some of the lessons we can learn today when it comes to the precision of our doctrinal statements.
2. Agree or Disagree. Human pride is at the heart of every doctrinal controversy.
3. Follow-Up: What role does pride play when confronting error or being confronted with error?
4. Compare Melancthon's attempts at compromise with the Roman Catholic leaders to the ELCA's attempts at compromise with the Roman Catholic Church. Describe the impact this has on the souls we encounter in our outreach and what, if any, impact this has on the way we teach about the topic of good works.
5. How balanced are the messages we preach and teach in our church body and in our individual congregations? Is there too much emphasis either way? How can we improve or be more specific?
6. In our church body or congregation is there greater emphasis on one particular area of sanctification, such as stewardship, to the detriment of others? If so, how can that change?

7. Are we properly equipping God's people for works of service? How can we equip parents to teach their children the role of good works in their lives? How do we model and teach the importance of sanctification as we teach young and old alike?

### ***Conclusion***

“Always walk the narrow Lutheran middle road!” It was a challenge for the writers of the *Formula of Concord*, but by God's grace and by their example, they have taught us how to tread that blessed road with care and concern for God's truth and for the souls he has placed under our care. It is my prayer that the Lord bless you as you proclaim his message of justification and sanctification to God's people. May our gracious Lord teach each of us to treasure that “narrow Lutheran middle road” all the days of our lives! To God alone be the glory, Amen.

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