

The Augsburg Confession

Article 16

Of Civil Authority

This was a very important article in the eyes of emperor Charles V, especially in light of the events within Germany during the past 10 years. In 1524-25 a revolt known as the Peasant's Revolt raged in Germany, which became one of the bloodiest revolts in the history of the world. Because of his many harsh words against the nobles of Germany for their oppression of the common people (prior to 1524), and his previous connection to those involved in the revolt, Luther was seen by many as an instigator of this bloody revolt which took the lives of as many as 100,000 people.

Roman theologian John Eck tried to take advantage of this by compiling quotations of Luther and his followers which negatively referred to civil authorities, in order to raise the ire of Charles V against Luther. But much of this was taken out of context, and did not accurately picture the attitude of Luther or his fellow reformers (many of whom were nobles and leaders in Germany). In fact, after the Peasant's Revolt Luther directed even harsher words against the peasants and those who had incited them and led them in revolt (cf. Luther's writing "*Against the Murderous, Thieving Hordes of Peasants*" - 1525).

The presentation of this article was an opportunity for the Lutherans to defend themselves from false accusations and to proclaim their true teachings concerning subjection to civil authorities.

Article XVI

The Lutherans state: *It is taught among us that all government in the world and all established rule and laws were instituted and ordained by God for the sake of good order, and that Christians may without sin occupy civil offices or serve as princes and judges, render decisions and pass sentence according to imperial and other existing laws, punish evildoers with the sword, engage in just wars, serve as soldiers, buy and sell, take required oaths, possess property, be married, etc.*

Condemned here are the Anabaptists who teach that none of the things indicated above is Christian.

Also condemned are those who teach that Christian perfection requires the forsaking of house and home, wife and child, and the renunciation of such activities as are mentioned above. Actually, true perfection consists alone of proper fear of God and real faith in God, for the Gospel does not teach an outward and temporal but an inward and eternal mode of existence and righteousness of the heart. The Gospel does not overthrow civil authority, the state, and marriage but requires that all these be kept as true orders of God and that everyone, each according to his own calling, manifest Christian love and genuine good works in his station of life. Accordingly Christians are obliged to be subject to civil authority and obey its commands and laws in all that can be done without sin. But when commands of the civil authority cannot be obeyed without sin, we must obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29).

Civil Authorities Established by God

From the very beginning of the article the Lutherans made it clear to the emperor (and the Romanists) that they believed and taught the government was established by God and should be obeyed. The Lutherans were being condemned for causing insurrection and violence, but in reality the Lutheran teaching on civil authority served to promote and support good order in society. Lutheran teaching was based on the clear words of Scripture:

Paul wrote, "Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil. Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing" (Romans 13:1-6).

"Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether to the king as supreme, or to governors, as to those who are sent by him

for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good.... Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king” (1 Peter 1:13-14, 17).

“Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to obey, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing all humility to all men” (Titus 3:1-2).

The Lutheran doctrine was that people should obey their civil leaders, and that Christians were free to become involved in the civil arena of society. Instead of condoning or encouraging civil disobedience, the Lutherans condemned it! The only exception to this would be in a situation where the government commands disobedience to God – in such a case it would be the Christian’s duty to obey God, who is the higher authority.

Condemnation of False Views

Two groups are condemned in this article. The first was the Anabaptists. Once again the Lutherans had been lumped together with others who had broken away from the Roman Church during the years following Luther’s posting of the 95 Theses. The Anabaptists were much more radical in their teachings and actions. Though they sided with Luther in the early years of the reformation, it soon became clear that they were not of the same spirit. They rejected infant baptism, destroyed church images and relics, and even condemned governmental authorities. One of these men, Thomas Muntzer, sought to establish a pure form of communism and was instrumental in starting the Peasant’s Revolt in 1524.

For that reason it was necessary to clarify that the Lutherans were very different from the Anabaptists, and condemned their actions even as the Romans did. This was made necessary in part because of the accusations made by Eck just prior to the Diet at Augsburg.

The Lutherans also condemned a second group in this article. This condemnation is more broad and refers to aspects of monasticism which taught that perfection could be attained by leaving the world and forsaking civil responsibilities.

The second condemnation was against a group that was unnamed in this article. In subsequent articles (especially Articles XXIII and XXVII) it becomes clear that the Romanists are the ones who are being referred to here. The Roman theologians must not have recognized the Lutheran's vague attack since in the Roman Confutation, they write that this article "*is received with pleasure*".

Summary

The problem with both sides was a misunderstanding of the Gospel. On one hand, the Anabaptists despised as evil something that God had established. On the other, the Romanists sought righteousness through works rather than through "*proper fear of God and real faith in God.*" In reality, the Gospel supports and defends civil authority as established by God for the good and protection of its citizens. Our responsibility is: "*that everyone, each according to his own calling, manifest Christian love and genuine good works in his station of life.*"

There are many still today who adhere to the errors spoken of in this article and who do not understand the Gospel. May we, as true Christians, be faithful citizens of our country, and may the LORD grant us leaders who are faithful in their calling!

Note: This study was prepared for the Bible Class at Zion Lutheran Church, Lawrenceville, GA by Pastor Nathanael Mayhew.