

The Augsburg Confession

Article 20

Good Works

This article, though placed near the conclusion of the first section of the Augsburg Confession, follows naturally after the study of [Article 6 - Of New Obedience](#). The foundation laid in that article is necessary for a proper understanding of the role and purpose of good works. As we study this article, keep in mind our brief summary of Article 6: New obedience is the work of God in the child of God. It flows from God's act of declaring us "not guilty" through faith in Christ, and it can in no way merit forgiveness or anything from God.

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Article 20 is the longest article in the first part of the Augsburg Confession. We can readily divide it into several smaller sections in order to help us better understand its purpose.

- The article begins with a defense of the Lutheran theologians who, it was said, forbid people to do good works. The confessors point out that they do not forbid good works, they encouraged them. But their emphasis was on true good works, rather than useless works that were self-righteous in nature (1-7).
- They continue with a brief summary of what the Lutheran churches teach concerning good works: *"We begin by teaching that our works cannot reconcile us with God or obtain grace for us, for this happens only through faith, that is, when we believe that our sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, who alone is the mediator who reconciles the Father. Whoever imagines that he can accomplish this by works, or that he can merit grace, despises Christ and seeks his own way to God, contrary to the Gospel."* They follow this summary with the Scriptural support for their teaching on good works (8-11).
- The next section refers to the teaching of Augustine to demonstrate from church history that their teaching about good works is not a new teaching (12-13).

- They continue to discuss the peace and comfort that sinners can find only through the message of forgiveness, and never through works: *“The conscience cannot come to rest and peace through works, but only through faith, that is when it is assured and knows that for Christ’s sake it has a gracious God, as Paul says in Romans 5:1, ‘Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God.’”* Peace can only come through faith in Christ’s work for us (15-22).
- In order to clarify what is meant by faith, they present the Scripture’s own definition of faith, and clarify that saving faith is different from the “knowledge” of Christ which both the devil and unbelievers may possess. *“The Scriptures speak about faith but do not mean by it such knowledge as the devil and ungodly men possess. Heb. 11:1 teaches about faith in such a way as to make it clear that faith is not merely a knowledge of historical events but is a confidence in God and in the fulfillment of His promises”* (23-26).
- In conclusion, the article reiterates that good works are important and will be prevalent in the lives of God’s children, not meriting God’s grace, but as a fruit of faith in Christ’s work. *“It is also taught among us that good works should and must be done, not that we are to rely on them to earn grace but that we may do God’s will and glorify Him. It is always faith alone that apprehends grace and forgiveness of sin. When through faith the Holy Spirit is given, the heart is moved to do good works. Before that, when it is without the Holy Spirit, the heart is too weak.”* Once again the Scriptural support is offered: *“Such great and genuine works cannot be done without the help of Christ, as He Himself says in John 15:5, ‘Apart from me you can do nothing’”* (27-39).

Contradictions or Various Interpretations?

As we study certain teachings of Scripture it may seem that many passages can be found which are contradictory. For example: The Jehovah’s Witnesses will quote Scripture passages that speak of this earth remaining for eternity while we point to passages that say that this earth will be destroyed by fire. Millennialists refer to passages which speak of a one thousand year reign of Christ on earth, but we bring up passages that say Christ’s kingdom is not of this world. This “dilemma” has been the cause of some disturbing results. Some have concluded that everyone’s truth is different saying “You have your understanding and I have mine.” Others have decided that the Scripture is full of contradictions and errors, and is not different than any other human writing.

Beware of such conclusions! Thoughts like these undermine the only source of truth in this world: The Word of God. This Word has been given ***“by inspiration of God” (2 Timothy 3:16)*** and is ***“perfect” “sure” “right” “pure” “clean” “true and righteous” and “more to be desired than gold” (Psalm 19)***. As such, we realize and confess that Scripture does not contain errors or contradictions. Nor are we to allow individual interpretations of Scripture since Peter says: ***“No prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:20-21)***.

Scripture on Good Works

The Lutherans taught: ***“our works cannot reconcile us with God or obtain grace for us.”*** Scripture says that we are ***“justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:24)***. Jesus told His disciples: ***“Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life” (John 5:24)***. Paul writes: ***“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9)***.

The Roman Catholics taught that *good works do merit the remission of sins*. Scripture also says that God will ***“render to each one according to his deeds’: eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality; but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness—indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil” (Romans 2:6-9)***. Jesus says: ***“For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works” (Matthew 16:27)***. The apostle John writes: ***“And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books” (Revelation 20:12)***.

Note: Scripture often commands Christians to do good works (Matthew 5:16; 2 Corinthians 8:4; Galatians 6:9-10; Ephesians 5:16; and Titus 2:14 are a few examples).

So are we saved by faith in Christ or by our works? The forgiveness of our sins must come one of these two ways, but it cannot be both - Paul says that these two are mutually exclusive (Romans 11:6). Can these two thoughts be reconciled with one another?

Faith and Works

As we search the Scriptures for passages which speak of faith and works, we will find many that refer to both. These passages of Scripture are looking at our justification from two different points of view - from God's point of view and from man's point of view. The LORD told Samuel: ***“man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7)***. God looks at the heart of human beings - knowing whether true faith is present on the inside, and He justifies us through that faith.

On the other hand we cannot see the heart, but ***“will know them by their fruits” (Matthew 7:16)***. Those passages which speak of us being judged according to our works can be properly understood since works will be present where faith is. Both faith and works are the work of God as Paul says: ***“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:8-10)***.