

The Augsburg Confession

Article 27

Concerning Monastic Vows

This article is a follow-up to the church customs and traditions mentioned in Article XV. In that article the Lutherans stated that monastic vows were one of several customs which were abused in the Roman Church, and those abuses are taken up here in Article XXVII. Once again, the main concern was that the teaching about vows was obscuring the gospel message of salvation by grace.

Vows in Scripture

Before we get into the content of this article, let's consider the concept and nature of vows in Scripture where we find numerous references to vows. Most of these references are found in the Old Testament and are connected to the ceremonial worship of Old Testament believers (see Leviticus 27, Numbers 30 and Psalm 50). It is important to realize that vows can be both good and also bad - some are encouraged and others are condemned. As we will see, this is determined by the nature and purpose of the vow.

Most vows were made for the purpose of calling upon God for help or as a demonstration of a person's faith. **Some Examples:** Jacob vowed to serve the LORD at Bethel as he journeyed to his uncle Laban's (Genesis 28:20-22); Jephthah vowed to make a sacrifice to the LORD if He would deliver the Ammonites into his hand (Judges 11:29-40); Hannah vowed that if the LORD blessed her with a child she would give him to the LORD (1 Samuel 1:11); the men who threw Jonah overboard made vows (Jonah 1:16); Paul made a vow and cut his hair (Acts 18:18).

Once a vow was made, it was to be fulfilled, but the vow must be made voluntarily and not under compulsion. ***"When you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay to pay it; for the LORD your God will surely require it of you, and it would be sin to you. But if you abstain from vowing, it shall not be sin to you. That which has gone from your lips you shall keep and perform, for you voluntarily vowed to the LORD your God what you have promised with your mouth"*** (Deuteronomy 23:21-23). In addition, it is foolish to make a vow without thinking, and

would be better not to make a vow at all (Proverbs 20:25, Ecclesiastes 5:4-5). This would be true in the case of Jephthah's vow.

Finally, vows which cannot be fulfilled without sinning against a command of God are not pleasing to God and should not be kept. Jesus spoke about the foolishness of such vows in Mark 7:1-13 condemning the keeping of man-made commandments while neglecting the commandments of God. These general principles from Scripture will help us better understand the purpose of this article.

Article XXVII

Again, since this is one of the longest articles in the Augsburg Confession we will not reprint it here in its entirety. The following is a summary of the contents of the article.

Lines 1-2: Introduction. Three main considerations: 1) How do people view monastic vows; 2) what is monastic life like; and 3) what about monastic vows is contrary to the Word of God? (and even the church). It is pointed out that monastic life in itself is not bad, but it has been corrupted by work-righteousness.

Lines 3-10: Youth and ignorance. Many of those who took monastic vows made them in their youth or in ignorance, without thinking the promise through thoroughly (not unlike Luther himself). Many people would put young people in monasteries in order to assure that they would be provided for, although monastic life was very severe. This was displeasing to many.

Lines 11-14: Vows were considered meritorious. Once again it is demonstrated how the Roman Church was undermining the work of Christ by teaching that certain works merit forgiveness of sin and justification before God. Monastic vows were claimed to be equal and even more beneficial than Baptism, and that through monastic life one could obtain more merit before God than in any other calling.

Lines 15-17: Past advantages of monasteries. In the past, monasteries were used to instruct men in the teachings of the Bible, from which pastors and teachers would come.

But now they do not teach the Bible, instead they teach that monastic life is a state of perfection and is a means of earning God's grace.

Lines 18-21: Vows of celibacy. This was taken up fully in Article 23, but is mentioned again here because of its connection to vows. Again they point out that forced celibacy is contrary to the command of God.

Lines 22-23: Vows and God's command. No vow can revoke the commands of God. Vows made which are contrary to the command and will of God are not binding.

Lines 24-26: Dispensations. The church released certain people from their vows in political situations, so they should be willing and able to free others from vows for spiritual reasons as well.

Lines 27-30: Vows must be voluntary. The Roman Church insists on forcing people to keep their vows even if they did not make the vow voluntarily. Rather, *"it belongs to the very nature and character of a vow that it should be voluntary and should be assumed only after due consideration and counsel"* (§ 30).

Lines 31-35: Vows in youth and marriage. Several church canons annul the vows of those made in their youth. Since most people took these vows in their youth, this is excuse enough for them to abandon those vows. Marriages should not be dissolved because of vows.

Lines 36-43: Earning righteousness is contrary to the Gospel. Anything that is done to earn God's grace is contrary to the Gospel - even more so when they are man-made rules. Instead, *"righteousness and godliness in God's sight come from faith and trust when we believe that God receives us into His favor for the sake of Christ, His only Son"* (§ 30). Such ungodly vows which seek to earn God's grace are null and void since they lead people into sin. Those who teach that we are justified by vows have fallen from the God's grace as Paul says in Galatians 5:4.

Lines 44-48: Elevating works to a means of achieving justification. It was bad enough that the church taught that monastic vows and life earned forgiveness of sins, but on top of that they also taught that these good works could also be applied to others. Exalting works in this way resulted in obscuring the righteousness of faith in Christ.

Lines 49-60: The harmful results of teaching perfection. First, teaching that monks alone can achieve a state of perfection obscures the commands of God and true service to Him. True perfection is not found in what we wear or how we act, but in trusting in Christ with our whole hearts. This leads the common people to think that they are not as good as those who have taken monastic vows, and have caused some to abandon their families and responsibilities to enter monastic life. Instruction has been given that this is not serving God but is disobeying His commands in order to keep the commands of men.

Lines 61-62: Conclusion. There are four errors connected to monastic vows: 1) vows justify people before God; 2) vows offer perfection; 3) vows are the way to fulfill the commands of God and the church; and 4) vows are meritorious beyond what God demands. Since this is all false, such vows are useless and are of no value.

Conclusion

Once again we see how the doctrine of justification by grace through faith in Christ is corrupted and even destroyed by the teachings of the Roman Church (also in connection with their man-made customs). Paul writes: ***“And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer” (Romans 11:6).***