

# The Augsburg Confession

## Article 28

### Of the Power of Bishops

The title of this article as it is found in the Augsburg Confession is “Of the Power of Bishops” or “Ecclesiastical Power” (Latin). Another title for this article is “Of the Power of the Keys” which is also an appropriate summary of its content. The purpose of this article is twofold: The first is to show that there must be a distinction between the roles of the church and the state. This line has been blurred throughout history (with many ugly consequences) and was prevalent in Europe at this time. This article was a major concern for Eck and the Romanists, since this directly rebelled against their power and authority. The second purpose of this article is to re-emphasize the true role of bishops, namely, to administer the keys given by Christ to His church on earth.

Most of the articles in the Augsburg Confession are based on those previously found in the Torgau and Schwabach Articles, but this one is somewhat different. There is no article in those statements that corresponds directly to this article. Now, this is not completely new material, but this is the first time that an entire article is devoted to it, and it becomes the longest article in the Confession! The reason for this is the author’s fervor for this particular subject. During the meetings at Augsburg Melanchthon wrote to Luther saying, *“In all our discussions no topic troubles me more than this one.”*

### A Brief Summary of Article XXVIII

#### Part 1 - Separation of Church and State

**Lines 1-4:** Introduction. There is a distinction that must be made between spiritual and temporal power. Both are important and are established by God but they must be kept separate from one another since their roles are distinct and different. Many serious problems have resulted in confusing these roles.

**Lines 5-11:** The role of the church. The power of bishops is that command given by Christ to proclaim the Gospel, to use the ministry of the keys to forgive or retain sins,

and to administer the sacraments. The purpose of the church is to care for the spiritual and eternal welfare of people through the preaching and teaching of the Word of God. The purpose of the church is NOT to interfere with the affairs of government whose responsibility it is to care for the physical welfare and protection of the people.

**Lines 12-19:** Separation of church and state roles. These two estates, one spiritual and the other temporal, must both be honored, but not mingled. The church should not involve itself in the affairs of government since they have a responsibility of their own to fulfill. When bishops do have political office they must remember that this role is separate from their spiritual role.

**Lines 20-29:** Obedience and disobedience. The bishop's role is to *“preach the Gospel, forgive sins, judge doctrine and condemn doctrine that is contrary to the Gospel, and exclude from the Christian community the ungodly whose wicked conduct is manifest”* (§ 21). To carry this out bishops are to use the Word of God alone and not temporal authority. If the bishops are true to the Word of God and follow it, the people are to be obedient to them. If, on the other hand, the bishops teach contrary to the Word, the people should not obey. An example from Augustine is given. When matters within the church get out of hand and threaten to cause rebellion, the government has the responsibility to step in to prevent disorder in the land.

## **Part 2 - The Bishop's Power to Introduce New Ceremonies**

**Lines 30-33:** The Romanist arguments concerning the right of bishops to introduce new ceremonies and regulations. As evidence that bishops do have such power the Romanist offer the matter of the Sabbath, which they say, the church changed from Saturday to Sunday.

**Note:** We reject the idea that the church has the power to change the Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday. Rather, the Sabbath was abolished in the New Testament, not changed (cf. Colosians 3:16, Romans 14:5-6). This has been misunderstood even in our own country by many who have tried to take the Old Testament laws connected to the Sabbath and apply them to Sunday. The choice of “when” to worship is a matter of Christian Liberty.

**Lines 34-41:** Bishops cannot establish anything which is contrary to the Gospel. Once again it comes back to work-righteousness: *“It is patently contrary to God’s command and Word to make laws out of opinions or to require that they be observed in order to make satisfaction from sins and obtain grace, for the glory of Christ’s merit is blasphemed when we presume to earn grace by such ordinances”* (§ 35). The issues, as have been stated in previous articles are: new holy days (Article 15), prescribed fasts (Article 26), and the veneration of saints (Article 21), as well as other ceremonies. The problem with these teachings is that they are taught as a way of meriting God’s grace. There is nothing wrong with holy days, fasts, or celibacy in themselves, but because they are taught as a means of earning God’s grace, they become contrary to the Gospel.

**Lines 42-49:** Scriptural support for the Lutheran position. Scripture clearly forbids any regulation which is set up for the purpose of earning God’s grace and favor. The thought that the bishops have the power to establish such practices cannot be true, otherwise the Holy Spirit is mistaken in these many passages.

**Lines 50-52:** The role of Christian Liberty. Christian liberty in essence is this: *“that bondage to the law is not necessary for justification”* (§ 51). The heart of the Gospel is *“we do not merit [the grace of God] by services of God instituted by men”* (§ 52) and this teaching must be maintained!

**Lines 53-60:** Guidelines for ordinances and practices. Bishops and pastors should make changes as necessary for the orderly conduct of the church, but not as a means of making satisfaction for sins. Such ordinances which are established for the sake of good order and are not made a means of earning God’s grace ought to be kept by the church for the sake of love, peace and order in the church. The abrogation of the Sabbath and the custom of the New Testament church of worshiping on Sunday is used as an example of this Christian liberty.

**Lines 61-68:** The faulty arguments of the Romanists. The faulty reasoning of the Romanists (and other) is *“the false and erroneous opinion that in Christendom one must have services of God like the Levitical or Jewish services and that Christ commanded the apostles and bishops to devise new ceremonies which would be necessary for salvation”* (§ 61). Such actions bind consciences and destroy the righteousness of faith and Christian liberty. Some of these regulations were also temporary in nature, and not meant to be a permanent custom of the church.

**Lines 69-75:** The error of the bishops. The Lutherans ask that the bishops change their insistence on human regulations like celibacy (Article 23), the sacrifice of the mass (Article 24), and communion under one kind (Article 22) since they were introduced contrary to the custom of the church. If they will not do so, the Lutherans would be forced to follow the will of God and disobey them.

**Lines 76-78:** Conclusion. The intention of this article is to convince the bishops not to coerce people to sin by following these humanly devised ordinances for forgiveness of sins. If the bishops refuse, they will be held accountable before God for their actions.

## **Conclusion**

The church should keep to its work of preaching the Gospel for the salvation of souls, and not meddle in temporal affairs. The role of the pastor (and the church) is to lead people to the salvation won by Christ, and not invent customs by which people think they earn their own salvation, which destroys the Gospel and leads people to destruction. Lord, bless our Gospel preaching!