

The Augsburg Confession – 2

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Obedience Versus Legalism

Part 1

Last week we talked about the courage the Lutheran pioneers exhibited when they wrote the Augsburg Confession; but we didn't say anything about what they actually wrote. That's the topic for this week.

In general terms, the main issue was salvation. The Protestant Reformation is based on the belief that Jesus saves--not the church. Closely related to this is the issue of what part good works play in salvation. In the 16th century, when the Augsburg Confession was written, the Roman Church had instituted many rules that members had to obey or be kicked out of the church. This, combined with the belief that one had to be a member in good standing in the church to be saved, led to the belief that one had to obey all the church rules to be saved. Church leaders, not Jesus, decided who was saved and who was lost.

The straw that broke the camel's back was the sale of indulgences. The Roman Church claimed the power to forgive sin, in exchange for money. The Protestant belief is that forgiveness cannot be bought or earned.

The notion that one can obtain forgiveness by doing things commanded by the church is still a point of contention today. Although indulgences are no longer sold for money (at least, not officially) the Catholic Church does still grant indulgences. According to a Catholic source on the web,

Indulgences are the remission, in whole or in part, of the temporal punishment that is attached to the sins we have committed. By earning indulgences through prayer and other acts of charity, we can lessen our time in Purgatory or help those who are currently in Purgatory. ¹

Prayer for the souls in Purgatory is a requirement of Christian charity, and it helps us to call to mind our own mortality. This indulgence for a visit to a cemetery encourages us to spend even the briefest of moments in prayer for the dead. A good prayer to recite to earn the indulgence is Eternal Rest.

To obtain the plenary indulgence on November 1-November 8, we must receive Communion and sacramental Confession (and have no attachment to sin, even venial). Communion must be received each day we wish to gain the indulgence, but we only need to go to Confession once during the period. And, as with all plenary indulgences, we must pray for the intentions of the Holy Father (one Our Father and one Hail Mary) each day we perform the work of the indulgence. ²

That is just one manifestation of the belief that one can earn mercy by obeying church rules. Here's another one from the same Catholic source:

The rules for fasting and abstinence in the Catholic Church are set forth in the Code of Canon Law ...

Canon 1250: The penitential days and times in the universal Church are every Friday of the whole year and the season of Lent.

¹ <http://catholicism.about.com/od/indulgences/Indulgences.htm>

² http://catholicism.about.com/od/indulgences/p/Cemetery_Visit.htm

Canon 1251: Abstinence from meat, or from some other food as determined by the Episcopal Conference, is to be observed on all Fridays, unless a solemnity should fall on a Friday. Abstinence and fasting are to be observed on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday.

Canon 1252: The law of abstinence binds those who have completed their fourteenth year. The law of fasting binds those who have attained their majority, until the beginning of their sixtieth year. Pastors of souls and parents are to ensure that even those who by reason of their age are not bound by the law of fasting and abstinence, are taught the true meaning of penance.

At some point between the time I started going to first grade in a Cincinnati public school in 1954, and the time I graduated from a public high school in Lincoln, Nebraska, in 1966, I made this discovery: Monday through Thursday there was no telling what awful food would be served in the school cafeteria; but every Friday we were subjected to fish sticks. Even those of us who weren't Catholic were fed fish food on Friday in accordance with Catholic canon law.

Man-made rules, such as eating only fish on Friday, were condemned by Jesus Himself in Mark 7, verses 1 – 11.

The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were “unclean,” that is, unwashed. (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.)

So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, “Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with ‘unclean’ hands?”

He replied, “Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written:

**“These people honor me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.
They worship me in vain;
their teachings are but rules taught by men.’**

You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.”

And he said to them: “You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.’ But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: ‘Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban’ (that is, a gift devoted to God), then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother. Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that.” (Mark 7:1-11)

Jesus did not say that He abolished the fifth commandment, to honor your father and mother. He said that it was wrong for the Pharisees to nullify the commandment by superceding it with a man-made rule.

³ http://catholicism.about.com/od/catholicliving/f/Fasting_Rules.htm

That is exactly the thing that the Protestant Reformers saw the Roman Church doing. But when the Reformers spoke out against forced obedience to arbitrary church rules, they were accused of disobeying God. So, they put their beliefs in writing to clear up any confusion. Let's continue reading where we left off last week, from Chapter 11, *Protest of the Princes*, of the book, [The Great Controversy](#).

The reformed princes had determined upon having a statement of their views in systematic form, with the evidence from the Scriptures, to present before the Diet; and the task of its preparation was committed to Luther, Melancthon, and their associates. This Confession was accepted by the Protestants as an exposition of their faith, and they assembled to affix their names to the important document. It was a solemn and trying time. ...

The appointed time came to appear before the emperor. Charles V, seated upon his throne, surrounded by the electors and the princes, gave audience to the Protestant Reformers. The confession of their faith was read. In that august assembly the truths of the gospel were clearly set forth, and the errors of the papal church were pointed out. Well has that day been pronounced "the greatest day of the Reformation, and one of the most glorious in the history of Christianity and of mankind."--Ibid., b. 14, ch. 7.

[Just] a few years had passed since the monk of Wittenberg stood alone at Worms before the national council. Now in his stead were the noblest and most powerful princes of the empire. Luther had been forbidden to appear at Augsburg, but he had been present by his words and prayers. "I am overjoyed," he wrote, "that I have lived until this hour, in which Christ has been publicly exalted by such illustrious confessors, and in so glorious an assembly."--Ibid., b. 14, ch. 7. Thus was fulfilled what [Psalm 119:46] says: "I will speak of Thy testimonies . . . before kings."

...

Some of the princes of Germany were won to the reformed faith. The emperor himself declared that the Protestant articles were but the truth. The Confession was translated into many languages and circulated through all Europe, and it has been accepted by millions in succeeding generations as the expression of their faith.

God's faithful servants were not toiling alone. ... Could their eyes have been opened, they would have seen as marked evidence of divine presence ... angels guard[ed] the workers in the cause of the Reformation.

...

God did listen to the cries of His servants. He gave to princes and ministers grace and courage to maintain the truth against the rulers of the darkness of this world. ... The Protestant Reformers had built on Christ, and the gates of hell could not prevail against them.⁴

[music – Hud and Larry deFluiter accompanied by JoAn Witzel, "I Know Who I Have Believed"]

⁴ Ellen White, [The Great Controversy](#), Chapter 11, "Protest of the Princes", <http://www.whiteestate.org/books/gc/gc11.html>

Part 2

With all that background, let's now look at what the Augsburg Confession actually says. Complete English translations are easily found on the Internet. There's a link to one on our 2012 program archives page on our web site, KRSF.NET. Here are some highlights.

*It has been the general persuasion, not of the people alone, but also of those teaching in the churches, that making Distinctions of Meats, and like traditions of men, are works profitable to merit grace, and able to make satisfactions for sins. And that the world so thought, appears from this, that new ceremonies, new orders, new holy-days, and new fastings were daily instituted, and the teachers in the churches did exact these works as a service necessary to merit grace, and did greatly terrify men's consciences, if they should omit any of these things. From this persuasion concerning traditions much detriment has resulted in the Church.*⁵

So, the concern of those Lutheran pioneers was that the traditions of men were taking precedence over the commandments of God. They saw three dangers in this.

First, the doctrine of grace and of the righteousness of faith has been obscured by it, which is the chief part of the Gospel, and ought to stand out as the most prominent in the Church, in order that the merit of Christ may be well known, and faith, which believes that sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, be exalted far above works. ...

Secondly, these traditions have obscured the commandments of God, because traditions were placed far above the commandments of God. Christianity was thought to consist wholly in the observance of certain holy-days, rites, fasts, and vestures. These observances had won for themselves the exalted title of being the spiritual life and the perfect life. Meanwhile the commandments of God ... were accounted works that were worldly and imperfect, and far below those glittering observances. And this error greatly tormented devout consciences ... and falsely imagined that the observances of such men were more acceptable to God.

*Thirdly, traditions brought great danger to consciences; for it was impossible to keep all traditions, and yet men judged these observances to be necessary acts of worship.... [M]any fell into despair, and ... some even took their own lives, because they felt that they were not able to satisfy the traditions, and they had all the while not heard any consolation of the righteousness of faith and grace. ...*⁶

These are the three reasons why the Protestant leaders rejected the observance of man-made traditions. They are pure and noble reasons. But people tend to project their own motives on the motives of others, so the power-loving church leaders suspected that the Protestant leaders were motivated by jealousy. Therefore, the Lutherans made it a point to state their true motives.

Wherefore our teachers must not be looked upon as having taken up this matter rashly or from hatred of the bishops, as some falsely suspect. There was great need to warn the churches of these errors, which had arisen from misunderstanding the traditions. For the Gospel compels us to insist in the churches upon the doctrine of grace, and of the righteousness of faith; which, however, cannot be understood, if men think that they merit grace by observances of their own choice.

⁵ <http://www.projectwittenberg.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/concord/web/augs-026.html>

⁶ <http://www.projectwittenberg.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/concord/web/augs-026.html>

*Thus, therefore, they have taught that by the observance of human traditions we cannot merit grace or be justified, and hence we must not think such observances necessary acts of worship. ...*⁷

Many people, not just the church leaders of the day, confuse observance of traditions with “good works.” The Augsburg Confession tries to clear up this confusion by saying,

*[We] teach that this faith is bound to bring forth good fruits, and that it is necessary to do good works commanded by God, because of God's will, but that we should not rely on those works to merit justification before God. For remission of sins and justification is apprehended by faith, as also the voice of Christ attests: When ye shall have done all these things, say: We are unprofitable servants. Luke 17, 10. The same is also taught by the Fathers. For Ambrose says: It is ordained of God that he who believes in Christ is saved, freely receiving remission of sins, without works, by faith alone.*⁸

*Our teachers are falsely accused of forbidding good Works. For their published writings on the Ten Commandments, and others of like import, bear witness that they have taught to good purpose concerning all estates and duties of life, as to what estates of life and what works in every calling be pleasing to God. Concerning these things preachers heretofore taught but little, and urged only childish and needless works, as particular holy-days, particular fasts, brotherhoods, pilgrimages, services in honor of saints, the use of rosaries, monasticism, and such like. Since our adversaries have been admonished of these things, they are now unlearning them, and do not preach these unprofitable works as heretofore. Besides, they begin to mention faith, of which there was heretofore marvelous silence. They teach that we are justified not by works only, but they conjoin faith and works, and say that we are justified by faith and works. This doctrine is more tolerable than the former one, and can afford more consolation than their old doctrine.*⁹

Notice that the Lutherans are taking credit for getting salvation by faith and the Ten Commandments preached from the Roman pulpit, where previously only “particular holy-days, particular fasts, brotherhoods, pilgrimages, services in honor of saints, the use of rosaries, monasticism, and such like” had been preached. In effect, they are arguing that they can’t be guilty of heresy if the Church is following their lead and teaching the same things. In particular,

[O]ur teachers have instructed the churches concerning faith as follows: --

First, that our works cannot reconcile God or merit forgiveness of sins, grace, and justification, but that we obtain this only by faith when we believe that we are received into favor for Christ's sake, who alone has been set forth the Mediator and Propitiation, 1 Tim. 2, 6, in order that the Father may be reconciled through Him. Whoever, therefore, trusts that by works he merits grace, despises the merit and grace of Christ, and seeks a way to God without Christ, by human strength, although Christ has said of Himself: I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. John 14, 6.

This doctrine concerning faith is everywhere treated by Paul, Eph. 2, 8: By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, etc.

And lest any one should craftily say that a new interpretation of Paul has been devised by us, this entire matter is supported by the testimonies of the Fathers. For Augustine, in many volumes, defends grace and the righteousness of faith, over against the merits of works. And Ambrose, ... teaches to like effect.

⁷ <http://www.projectwittenberg.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/concord/web/augs-026.html>

⁸ <http://www.projectwittenberg.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/concord/web/augs-006.html>

⁹ <http://www.projectwittenberg.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/concord/web/augs-020.html>

...

Heretofore consciences were plagued with the doctrine of works, they did not hear the consolation from the Gospel. Some persons were driven by conscience into the desert, into monasteries hoping there to merit grace by a monastic life. Some also devised other works whereby to merit grace and make satisfaction for sins. Hence there was very great need to treat of, and renew, this doctrine of faith in Christ, to the end that anxious consciences should not be without consolation but that they might know that grace and forgiveness of sins and justification are apprehended by faith in Christ.

...

Furthermore, it is taught on our part that it is necessary to do good works, not that we should trust to merit grace by them, but because it is the will of God. ...

Hence it may be readily seen that this doctrine is not to be charged with prohibiting good works, but rather the more to be commended, because it shows how we are enabled to do good works. For without faith human nature can in no wise do the works of the First or of the Second Commandment.¹⁰

The Augsburg Confession belabors the importance of doing good works. We have shared just a portion of what the Confession says on the topic. Hopefully we have shared enough to point out the difference between legalism, that is, performing man-made ceremonies in an attempt to earn salvation, and obedience, the voluntary fulfillment of God's commands that is the natural result of love for God.

The Augsburg Confession also makes a distinction between penance, which is a punishment imposed by the Church to cleanse oneself from sin, and repentance.

Of Repentance [we] teach that for those who have fallen after Baptism there is remission of sins whenever they are converted and that the Church ought to impart absolution to those thus returning to repentance. Now, repentance consists properly of these two parts: One is contrition, that is, terrors smiting the conscience through the knowledge of sin; the other is faith, which is born of the Gospel, or of absolution, and believes that for Christ's sake, sins are forgiven, comforts the conscience, and delivers it from terrors. Then good works are bound to follow, which are the fruits of repentance.

[We] condemn the Anabaptists, who deny that those once justified can lose the Holy Ghost. Also those who contend that some may attain to such perfection in this life that they cannot sin.

The Novatians also are condemned, who would not absolve such as had fallen after Baptism, though they returned to repentance.

They also are rejected who do not teach that remission of sins comes through faith but command us to merit grace through satisfactions of our own.¹¹

This is about the Sum of our Doctrine, in which, as can be seen, there is nothing that varies from the Scriptures, or from the Church Catholic, or from the Church of Rome as known from its writers. This being the case, they judge harshly who insist that our teachers be regarded as heretics. There is, however, disagreement on certain Abuses, which have crept into the Church without rightful authority.

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¹⁰ <http://www.projectwittenberg.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/concord/web/ausg-020.html>

¹¹ <http://www.projectwittenberg.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/concord/web/ausg-012.html>

*Inasmuch, then, as our churches dissent in no article of the faith from the Church Catholic, but only omit some abuses which are new, and which have been erroneously accepted by the corruption of the times, contrary to the intent of the Canons, we pray that Your Imperial Majesty would graciously hear both what has been changed, and what were the reasons why the people were not compelled to observe those abuses against their conscience.*¹²

The Confession ends with these words:

These are the chief articles which seem to be in controversy. For although we might have spoken of more abuses, yet, to avoid undue length, we have set forth the chief points, from which the rest may be readily judged. There have been great complaints concerning indulgences, pilgrimages, and the abuse of excommunications. The parishes have been vexed in many ways by the dealers in indulgences. There were endless contentions between the pastors and the monks concerning the parochial right, confessions, burials, sermons on extraordinary occasions, and innumerable other things. Issues of this sort we have passed over so that the chief points in this matter, having been briefly set forth, might be the more readily understood. Nor has anything been here said or adduced to the reproach of any one. Only those things have been recounted whereof we thought that it was necessary to speak, in order that it might be understood that in doctrine and ceremonies nothing has been received on our part against Scripture or the Church Catholic. For it is manifest that we have taken most diligent care that no new and ungodly doctrine should creep into our churches.

The above articles we desire to present in accordance with the edict of Your Imperial Majesty, in order to exhibit our Confession and let men see a summary of the doctrine of our teachers. If there is anything that any one might desire in this Confession, we are ready, God willing, to present ampler information according to the Scriptures.

*Your Imperial Majesty's
faithful subjects:*

*John, Duke of Saxony, Elector.
George, Margrave of Brandenburg.
Ernest, Duke of Lueneberg.
Philip, Landgrave of Hesse.
John Frederick, Duke of Saxony.
Francis, Duke of Lueneberg.
Wolfgang, Prince of Anhalt.
Senate and Magistracy of Nuremburg.
Senate of Reutlingen.*¹³

That remains the position of Protestants today. Over the centuries, false doctrines crept into God's church, the Roman Catholic Church. These doctrines replaced God's grace with Church authority. Obedience to God's commands was replaced by legalistic observance of Church traditions.

The good news is that you don't need to earn salvation by performing ceremonies. Salvation is a gift that Jesus gave you when He died on the cross.

[music – Ridgecrest United Methodist Church Choir, "Lord I Want to be a Christian"]

¹² <http://www.projectwittenberg.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/concord/web/aug-021.html>

¹³ <http://www.projectwittenberg.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/concord/web/aug-029.html>