

## **Article IV of the Formula of Concord "Of Good Works"**

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Just the mention of the phrase "good works" has the tendency to make a WELS Theologian sit up and take notice. This is certainly true in our circles today, but it was especially so in those early days of the Lutheran Church. Today we want to, on the basis of Article IV of the Formula of Concord, take a close look at "good works" and where they actually fit in our Christian lives.

We want to do so first of all by reviewing some of the background which led to the writing of Article IV of the Formula of Concord.

The main controversy leading to the writing of this article is known as the Majoristic Controversy. It is named after George Major, a friend and colleague of Philip Melancton. He endorsed the phrase "good works are necessary to salvation." One might, however, point his finger at Melancton, as the father of this controversy. He was the first to use this phrase. He did so as early as 1535 in his *Loci*, a textbook on Christian doctrine. His main objective in doing so seems to have been an effort to refute the argument of some that since a man was a believer he could live his life in whatever way he wanted with no concern whatsoever in pleasing God. Therefore, he stated that good works were essential to salvation. Luther cautioned him several times against using that misleading phrase. Melancton agreed that it could be misunderstood and that he should modify it. But he remained ambivalent, willing only to admit that the words could be misunderstood, not that they were wrong in themselves. At the time of the Augsburg and Leipzig Interims when Catholic pressure was on him, he clearly was hedging and fudging on this whole matter of the relation of good works to salvation. But thereafter he often said that the expression "good works are necessary to salvation" was open to abuse and, therefore, ought to be abandoned. Obviously he wanted to avoid at all costs the Romanist teaching that good works merit salvation. He could have cleared up the whole confusion if he had admitted that, as first phrased, the expression was faulty and wrong theology; and that what he should have said is that good works are the necessary fruits that flow from faith. But he never backed down on his first version or formulation. As a result many of his followers continued to use and defend it.

"Foremost among the exponents of Melancton's point of view was Major. He had sided with his mentor for some time; but it was chiefly from the time of the Interims that he openly espoused Melancton's wording that good works are necessary to salvation - not because they merit or effect forgiveness of sins, he admitted, but in order that salvation, achieved by grace, might be preserved and not lost by disobedience. So, such works were necessary, if salvation was to be retained."<sup>1</sup> Major would only admit that the phrase was open to misunderstanding rather than admitting that it was fundamentally wrong.

Another man who entered the controversy and supported Major was Justice Menius. "Menius denied that he had ever used the proposition of Major. However, he not only refused to reject it, but defended the same error, though in somewhat different terms. He merely replaced the phrase 'good works' by 'new life,' 'new righteousness,' 'new obedience,' and affirmed 'that it is necessary to our salvation that such be wrought in us by the Holy Spirit ...With respect to the proposition, 'Good works are necessary to salvation', Menius stated that he could not simply

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted from E. Klug and O. Stahlke, "Getting Into the Formula of Concord (Concordia , 1977), page 39

condemn it as altogether false and heretical. Moreover, he argued: 'If it is correct to say: Sanctification, or renewal by the Holy Spirit, is necessary to salvation, then it cannot be false to say: Good works are necessary to salvation, since it is certain and cannot be gainsaid that sanctification and renewal do not and cannot exist without good works.' At the same time Menius, as stated above, claimed that he had never employed Major's proposition, and counseled others to abstain from its use in order to avoid misinterpretation. The same advice he gave with respect to his own formula, that new obedience is necessary to salvation.

"Menius also confounded justification and sanctification. He wrote: 'By faith in Christ alone we become just before God and are saved. Why? Because by faith one receives first, forgiveness of sins and the righteousness or obedience of Christ, with which He fulfilled the Law for us; thereupon, one also receives the Holy Spirit, who effects and fulfills in us the righteousness required by the Law, here in this life imperfectly, and perfectly in the life to come.'"<sup>2</sup>

The Majoristic Controversy also spawned other points of dispute such as is it correct to say: God requires good works, or, good works are necessary, and Christians are obliged or in duty bound to do good works? Some believed that good works were not *necessary* but were *voluntary* "because they are not extorted by fear and the penalty of the Law, but are to be done from a voluntary spirit and a joyful heart."<sup>3</sup>

"From the very beginning of the Reformation the Romanists had slandered Luther also by maintaining that he condemned good works and simply denied their necessity. A similar charge was made by the Majorists against their opponents generally. And Melanchton's writings, too, frequently create the same impression. But it was an inference of their own. They argued: If good works are not necessary to salvation, they cannot be necessary at all. Wigand wrote: 'It is a most malicious and insidious trait in the new teachers (the Majorists) that they, in order to gloss over their case, cry out with the Papists that the controversy is whether good works are necessary. But this is not in dispute, for no Christian ever denied it. Good works are necessary; that is certainly true. But the conflict arises from the appendix attached to it, and the patch pasted to it, viz., to salvation. And here all God-fearing men say that it is a detrimental, offensive, damnable, papistic appendix.'"<sup>4</sup>

Article IV of the Formula of Concord is the Lutheran Church's response to this controversy. "As regards the necessity or voluntariness of good works, it is manifest that in the Augsburg Confession and its Apology these expressions are often used and repeated that good works are necessary. Likewise, that it is necessary to do good works, which also are necessarily to follow faith and reconciliation. Likewise, that we necessarily are to do and must do such good works as God has commanded. Thus also in the Holy Scriptures themselves the words 'necessity,' 'needful,' and 'necessary,' likewise, 'ought' and 'must,' are used concerning what we are bound to do because of God's ordinance, command, and will, as Romans 13:5; I Cor. 9:9; Acts 5:29; John 15:12; I John 4:21.

"Therefore the expressions mentioned are unjustly censured and rejected in this Christian and proper sense, as has been done by some. They are used to rebuke and reject the delusion, as though there could be in a heart true faith and at the same time the wicked intention to continue in sins, which is impossible.

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted from Concordia Triglotta, Page 118

<sup>3</sup> Quoted from Concordia Triglotta, Page 123

<sup>4</sup> Quoted from Concordia Triglotta, Page 123

"But in this connection the following distinction must also be noted, that when this word "necessary" is employed, it should be understood not of coercion. The people of the New Testament are to be a willing people, Psalm 110:3, and sacrifice freely, Psalm 54:6, not grudgingly or of necessity, but are to be obedient from the heart, II Cor. 9:7. In this understanding it is correctly said and taught that truly good works should be done willingly or from a voluntary spirit by those whom the Son of God has made free.

"But it is false, and must be censured, when it is asserted and taught as though good works were free to believers in the sense that it were optional with them to do or to omit them, or that they might or could act contrary to the Law of God, and none the less could retain faith and God's favor and grace.

"Secondly, when it is taught that good works are necessary, it must also be explained why and for what reasons they are necessary, which reasons are enumerated in the Augsburg Confession and Apology. But here we must be well on our guard lest works are drawn and mingled into the article of justification and salvation. Therefore the propositions are justly rejected, that to believers good works are necessary for salvation, so that it is impossible to be saved without good works."<sup>5</sup>

The Bible clearly refutes the statement that "good works are necessary for salvation." The Apostle Paul in Romans chapter 4 says, "David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered." Paul also speaks to this in that familiar passage from Ephesians chapter 2: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast."

"Thirdly, since it is also disputed whether good works preserve salvation, or whether they are necessary for preserving faith, righteousness, and salvation, and this again is of high and great importance - for 'he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved,' Matt. 24:13. We must also explain well and precisely how righteousness and salvation are preserved in us, lest it be lost again.

"Above all, therefore, the false Epicurean delusion is to be earnestly censured and rejected, namely, that some imagine that faith and the righteousness and salvation which they have received can be lost through no sins or wicked deeds, not even through willful and intentional ones, but that a Christian although he indulges his wicked lusts without fear and shame, resist the Holy Ghost, and purposely engages in sins against conscience, yet nonetheless retains faith, God's grace, righteousness, and salvation.

"Against this pernicious delusion the following divine threats and severe punishments and admonitions should be often repeated and impressed upon Christians who are justified by faith: I Cor. 6:9 'Be not deceived, neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers etc., shall inherit the kingdom of God.' Romans 8:13: 'If ye live after the flesh, ye shall die.'

"But in order that the promise, not only of receiving, but also of retaining righteousness and salvation, may be firm and sure to us, St. Paul, in Romans 5:2, ascribes to faith not only the entrance to grace, but also that we stand in grace and boast of the future glory that is, the beginning, middle, and end he ascribes all to faith alone. Likewise, Col. 1:22: 'He will present you holy and unblamable and unreprouvable in His sight, if ye continue in the faith.'

"Since then it is manifest from God's Word that faith is the proper and only means by which righteousness and salvation are not only received, but also preserved by God, the decree of the Council of Trent and whatever elsewhere is set forth in the same sense, is justly to be

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted from Concordia Triglotta Page 943 & 945

rejected, namely, that: our good works preserve salvation, or that the righteousness of faith which has been received, or even faith itself, is either: entirely or in part kept and preserved by our works. I Peter 1 : 5, 9 says: 'By the power of God we are kept through faith unto salvation, receiving the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls.' "<sup>6</sup>

As is often the case one controversy leads to another. Nicholas Amsdorf, Luther's good friend, entered the fray against Major and Menius. However, he went to the other extreme asserting, "good works were injurious to salvation." He wanted to emphasize what Luther stood for and taught. However, he too failed to state the matter correctly. He left out the important modification which Luther had always added, "if one presumes to be justified by them." "Self-evidently the venerable Amsdorf, too, who from the very beginning of the Reformation had set an example in preaching as well as in living a truly Christian life, did not in the least intend to minimize, or discourage the doing of good works by his offensive phrase, but merely to eliminate good works from the article of justification."<sup>7</sup> Amsdorf's statement actually contradicted his own teaching. In speaking against Major he said, "who has ever taught or said that one should or need not do good works? For we all say and confess that after his renewal and new birth a Christian should love and fear God and do all manner of good works."

"To prevent a relapse into Romanism, such as might be occasioned by Major's error, and to correct the antinomian implications of Amsdorf's extreme statements, the formulators of the Formula of Concord treated the matter of the relationship between justifying faith and good works in Article IV of the Formula. Incidentally the Formula adds a caution against using unguarded, extreme words that unnecessarily cause confusion when discussing the truths of our faith. It urges believers to hold fast not only to the substance of true doctrine but also, quoting St. Paul, to 'hold fast to the form of sound words' (2 Timothy 1:13), especially in times of controversy."<sup>8</sup>

The Formula of Concord responded this way: "As regards the proposition that good works are said to be injurious to salvation, we explain ourselves clearly as follows: If anyone should wish to drag good works into the article of justification, or rest his righteousness or trust for salvation upon them, to merit God's grace and be saved by them, to this not we say, but St. Paul himself says, and repeats it three times, Philippians 3:7ff., that to such a man his own works are not only useless and a hindrance, but also injurious. But this is not the fault of the good works themselves, but of the false confidence placed in the works, contrary to the express Word of God.

"However, it by no means follows thence that we are to say flatly: Good works are injurious to believers for or as regards their salvation; for in believers good works are indications of salvation when they are done ...in the sense which God requires them of the regenerate, Philippians 1:20; for it is God's will and express command that believers should do good works, which the Holy Ghost works in believers, and with which God is pleased for Christ's sake, and to which He promises a glorious reward in this life and the life to come.

"For this reason, too, this proposition is censured and rejected in our churches, because as a flat statement it is false and offensive, by which discipline and decency might be impaired, and a barbarous, dissolute, secure, Epicurean life be introduced and strengthened. For what is injurious to his salvation a person should avoid with the greatest diligence.

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted from Concordia Triglotta Page 947 & 949

<sup>7</sup> Quoted from Concordia Triglotta Page 122

<sup>8</sup> Quoted from "Formula of Concord: A Study Guide for Bible Classes," Fricke, Page 45

"However, since Christians should not be deterred from good works, but should be admonished and urged therto most diligently, this bare proposition cannot and must not be tolerated, employed, nor defended in the church of Christ."<sup>9</sup>

So what about us today? What do we believe and teach? We too must emphatically state that good works do not earn or preserve salvation. On the other hand, we must also be clear in saying that a sinful life apart from God loses salvation. There are many in our world, of course, who would strongly disagree with us when we say that good works have no part in earning salvation. Therefore, we must be all the more diligent in adhering to what the Bible clearly teaches in this regard. This is so wonderfully summarized in *This We Believe* when it states, "We believe that God has justified all sinners, that is, he has declared them righteous for the sake of Christ. This is the central message of the Scripture upon which the very existence of the church depends. It is a message relevant to people of all times and places, of all races and social levels, for the 'result of one trespass was condemnation for all men' (Romans 5:18). All need forgiveness of sins before God, and Scripture proclaims that all have been justified, for 'the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men.'

"We believe that individuals receive this free gift of forgiveness not on the basis of their own works, but through faith (Ephesians 2: 8, 9).

"We believe that people cannot produce this justifying faith, or trust, their own hearts, because 'the man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him' (I Corinthians 2:14).

"We believe that sinners are saved by grace alone. Grace is the undeserved love of God for sinners. This love led God to give sinners everything they need for their salvation. It is all a gift of God. People can do nothing to earn any of it (Ephesians 2: 8, 9).

"We believe that faith in Jesus Christ always leads a believer to produce works that are pleasing to God. 'Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead' (James 2:17). As a branch in Christ the vine, a Christian produces good fruit (John 15:5).

"We believe that works pleasing to God are works of love, for 'love is the fulfillment of the law' (Romans 13:10)"<sup>10</sup>

Good works have their place in our Christian lives. But, let us always keep them in their place. To God be all the glory!

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<sup>9</sup> Quoted from Concordia Triglotta, Page 949 & 951

<sup>10</sup> Quoted from *This We Believe*, Pages 15,16, & 19

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