

THE AUGSBURG CONFESSION

ARTICLE XVI

CIVIL AFFAIRS

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## THE HISTORICAL NEED FOR ARTICLE XVI OF THE AUGSBURG CONFESSION

While Luther's interests and concerns dealt purely with the Word of God and the restoration of its pure teachings in the Christian church the Reformation did have many practical side effects. One of these had to do with the entire legal system of his day. All of Europe had come to rely on the Canon Law of the Roman church. Where the Lutheran Church displaced Roman Catholicism and her Canon Law a great and practical void was left. What role, if any, should the Lutheran Church play in filling this void? As always the question was what does Scripture say?

In the midst of the changes of the Reformation chaos and revolution broke out in various places. These uprisings were stirred up by Enthusiasts who advocated an entire new order to society. The common people were told to cast off the shackles of materialistic rulers in an attempt to forsake the evils of this world for the sake of the "gospel." Again the people needed to know what the Scriptures declare.

Remnants of monastic mysticism were picked up by other Enthusiasts who did not promote outward rebellion, but in the name of the "gospel" taught that true Christians should abandon all civil obligations lest they interfere with their spirituality.

All of these disruptions raised questions for Christians. Questions that needed clarification in order to ease the consciences of Christian prince and commoner alike. Luther responded quickly to these spiritual needs with writings like his Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments, 1525. At Augsburg the Lutherans summarized their Scriptural teaching on this matter to erase any notion that they

were a party to or encouraged civil disobedience.

The problems that arose and their related questions stemmed from a lack of understanding of the God-given role of the State and the Church. The lack of understanding outside Lutheran circles on this matter was underscored by the fact that in addition to this article, articles 27 and 28 also sought to clarify the position of Scripture.

#### THE GOD-GIVEN ROLE OF THE STATE

Romans 13:1-7 is the chief passage dealing with origin, purpose and function of the State. The words are so simple and clear I have to wonder what I am doing presenting this paper. How can such simple words be misunderstood?! (It appears that Satan has the best success dividing Christendom over the simple passages. After all, consider the volumes that have been written on Jesus' simple words, "this is my body" and "this is my blood.") But since the fact remains that modern Christendom is just as plagued with ignorance of these words as it was in Luther's day, we will briefly survey this passage and summarize what it says.

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Romans 13:1 - NIV

God makes it very easy to know which governmental authorities He has set up and expects us to obey. God commands that we obey the authority that is ruling at that moment in that place.

Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. 3 For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. 4 For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do

wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. 5 Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience.

6. This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing.

7 Give everyone what you owe him: if you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor. Romans 13:2-7

Our conduct toward the individual in authority is really our conduct toward God, since he is God's representative. The unbeliever obeys out of the compulsion of the law, that is the fear of punishment. But the child of God obeys out of love toward God.

St. Peter also exhorts us:

Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority,<sup>14</sup> or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. 15 For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. 1 Pt 2:13-15

God commands that all men obey His authorities, but when a Christian does, this serves to discredit the foolish accusations of God's enemies that the Gospel will undermine morality and thus society.<sup>1</sup>

The governments of the world are not pure human arrangements. God instituted them with the purpose that they serve His servants "to do you good" and as agents "of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer." (Romans 13:4) Through this service God wants the authorities to maintain peace and order, staving off chaos and violence. Paul brings out this purpose as he encourages Christians to pray that our government accomplish the task God assigned it.

I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone - 2 for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. 3 This is good, and pleases God our Savior. 1 Timothy 2:1-3

In order that the government might carry out this God-given role

God has given the government the sword to use if need be to command obedience of its subjects. This is not just a "military dress" item. It is a fully functional weapon that can deliver death, should the authority judge it prudent. This weapon is reserved for the authorities. No other individual dare assume the right to use the sword. Nor shall any group or organization, least of all a church.

#### THE GOD-GIVEN ROLE OF THE CHURCH

This topic is covered in later articles, but must be taken up at this time as well to understand why Article XVI condemns the Anabaptist and Perfectionists.

St. Paul helps us draw the distinct line of demarcation between the roles of the Church and State when he wrote the Corinthians:

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. 4 The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments 5 and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. 2 Corinthians 10:3-5

The Church of Jesus Christ does not use physical force or a material sword. Her sword is much more powerful. It is "the Sword of the Spirit, the word of God." (Ep 6:17)

We should expect that the church would use such a spiritual weapon as Jesus told Pilate:

My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place. John 18:36

In front of His disciples who had not yet understood that His kingdom was spiritual, not material, Jesus told Peter in the Garden:

Put your sword back in its place, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. 53 Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? Matthew 26:52,53

Peter had assumed authority that was not rightfully his by pulling the sword and using it. Jesus warned him that the State had God's authorization to put to death such usurpers of authority. Peter's position as an Apostle did not give him any authority to rule in external or civil matters. Jesus' kingdom is not of this world.

The true nature and character of Christ's kingdom is summarized by Paul when he wrote:

The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking,  
but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit  
Romans 14:17

The Lord's kingdom, the Church, does not handle the physical things with brute force. Rather through the spiritual weapon of God's Word the internal things of men, their stoney cold hearts are replaced with a warm heart filled with fear, love and trust for the Lord. No law or cold steel sword blade can effect that. It is a grave mistake when either the Church or the State steps into the God assigned roles of the other. It is even more tragic when either one picks up the others sword and attempts to use it in its own work. That can only result in chaos and utter confusion.

#### THE SOURCES OF CONFUSION

All confusion in the realm of operation for both Church and State can be traced to one thing. It always stems from a confusion of Law and Gospel. Misapplication of Law and Gospel commonly occurs in a number of areas.

Carlstadt insisted that the Church implement the Mosaic code out of a failure to realize that Christ has freed us from its demands having fulfilled them for us.

Others, thought that Jesus came to set up a new moral code by

which all people must live. They call Jesus' command "to love your neighbor as yourself" the "gospel" of the new covenant.

Very closely related to the previous confusion is the notion that the kingdom of Christ is of this world. This school of theology would seek to establish a "Christian kingdom of peace" world wide by proclaiming a message of meekness, humility, love and pacifism. Such a kingdom is sought by legislation or international coercion.

This confusion of Law and Gospel has its roots in the rejection of the three great truths restored in the Reformation. - Sole Fide, Sole Gratia, Sole Scriptura. Failure to accept the words of Scripture as the final authority in matters of faith and life is bound to lead to a misapplication of selected passages. In addition failure to understand or accept as true that we are only saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ automatically means the truth of the gospel has been distorted. When we see the whole matter from this perspective it is evident why the confessional Lutheran Church stands alone in a proper understanding of these roles.

For sometime now we have been speaking of the roles of both the State and the Church, but our article deals with "civil affairs." That is why the Apology can say, "Our opponents approve Article XVI without exception." This approval can not be accepted without some suspicion, since the Pope claimed both swords for himself and would hardly understand the civil estate of marriage in the same sense as we do. After all Rome has always claimed marriage as a duty of the church. To this we must also wonder how the condemnation of "those who place the perfection of the Gospel not in fear of God and in faith, but in forsaking civil duties," could be acceptable to Rome. After all Article XXVII, 49 condemns the claim that only monks are in a state of Christian perfection. A state which they supposedly lay claim to by abandoning the civil affairs

such as marriage and the ownership of property. But since this is mainly against the Enthusiasts we will turn our attention in that direction.

#### MANIFESTATIONS OF THIS ERROR

Common to all enthusiasts whose error in this teaching is their emphasis on Jesus' words concerning His disciples, "They are not of the world any more than I am of the world." (John 17:14b) From this it is deduced that truly spiritual Christians will seek to flee this sinful world by shutting themselves off from the world.

This teaching fails to take into account that no matter where a Christian goes he is taking his Old Adam with him. Since we can not reach a state of perfection this side of the grave, such attempts toward perfection are foolish, whether it is in a monastic type setting or in a community like the Amish.

These errorists would see their own foolishness if they continue reading in John 17:15. "My prayer is not that you (the Father) take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one." Jesus has good reason for praying this. He was sending the Apostles out into the world to tell others about Him. Very little if any evangelism gets done from behind the walls of religious communities. The proclamation of the Gospel is the work of the Church, but unless the believers continue to stay involved in civil affairs or living among the secular world, their light will not shine on the unbelievers.

It is significant that Article XVI is entitled "Civile Affairs" and not just "Civil Government." The question was if the Lutherans were going to abandon society, leaving all their responsibilities behind. Responsibilities including the home as well as the government. While this was not the way of the Lutherans, many common people were lead astray by false prophets in these matters.



False prophets instructed them in passages like Romans 12:19

Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.

And

I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.  
Matthew 5:38

In the mouths of the false prophets these passages which ban personal retribution, were broadened to forbid public retribution. The consciences of public leaders were weighed down at the thought that they might face a decision were they would break this misapplied principle. The truth of Romans 13, that the authority is God's servant for wrath was overlooked, leading to the growth of such pacifistic groups as the Quakers. While the Quakers did not forbid holding office, the Quaker control of the commonwealth of Pennsylvania ended when it was evident war was inevitable.

Still other errorists adopted the error of the Anti-Christ and forbid marriage, claiming celibacy was a holier estate. One of the best known groups to practice this was the Shakers.

#### THE BLESSED ESTATES OF CIVIL AFFAIRS

Scripture is full of examples and statements that demonstrate that God considers the things of civil affairs blessings. The fact that marriage can be entered without impairing ones sanctification is evident from the fact that marriage was instituted in the Garden of Eden before sin. To this testimony is added the Psalms 127 & 128 and Ephesians 5 which speak of its great blessings.

It is difficult to understand how the errorists could think of holding a civil office as a sin, when saints of old, like David, Moses, Solomon and Daniel all held offices with God's blessings. In the case of David and others before him, the Lord had commanded that they go out to war.

Pacifism is hardly the way the Lord commanded these Kings to reign.

When we consider the enthusiasts claim that God doesn't want His people to own things against the words of the 7th Commandment the conflict is instantaneously visible. If God doesn't want us to own things, why does He protect them with a special commandment? Here the enthusiast especially shows his colors. Out of a fear for materialism he legislates all possessions away, without changing the sinful desires of the heart.

Luther beautifully speaks of the blessing of carrying out our duties in our civil affairs, as he wrote in his Large Catechism under the 4th Commandment.

... notice what a great, good, and holy work is here assigned to children. (112)

. . . another strong incentive for us to keep this commandment is that God has attached to it a lovely promise, "That you may have long life." 131

(This commandment) is . . . instrument intended for our greatest welfare, to lead us to a quiet, pleasant, and blessed life. 132

. . . (a) maid-servant should take care not only to obey (her) master and mistress; but also to honor them as her own parents and do everything that she knows is expected of her . . . gladly and cheerfully . . . 143

If this truth could be impressed upon the poor people, a servant girl would dance for joy and praise and thank God; and with her careful work, for which she receives sustenance and wages, she would gain a treasure such as all who pass for the greatest of saints do not have. Is it not a wonderful thing to be able to boast to yourself, "If I do my daily housework faithfully, that is better than the holiness and austere life of all the monks?" 145

When a child of God carries out the duties of his civil affairs with love toward God and love toward his neighbor, there is no higher work or calling.

THE EXCEPTION TO CIVIL OBEDIENCE

The principle spelled out in Acts 5:29 and referred to at the close of Article XVI is really not an exception. The reason we as Christians obey the civil authorities is because they speak in civil matters for God. So when they command us to do something directly against God's revealed will, we continue to obey God. This is not civil disobedience as it is understood by many today. Our obedience to God rather than man is to be carried out while stilling showing respect for the Lord's civil servant. We are still bound to the honor and respect of the 4th commandment even if we can not obey in the one incident. It is obvious then that resisting arrest, violence and all other rebellious activity have no place in such disobedience. The Christians will simply refuse to comply in that one command even if it means death. For our God is more precious than our life in this world.

<sup>1</sup> This charge was made of the early Christina Church. Article 16 of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession mentions this in paragraph 6. The same charges were made against Luther when he proclaimed that salvation is a free gift of grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

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