

# **The Majoristic Controversy** **(1551-1562)**

**as Addressed by**

## **Article IV of the Formula of Concord** **(Of Good Works)**

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Pastor David A. Kipfmiller  
of St. John's – Westland, Michigan

# The Majoristic Controversy

## Article IV of the Formula of Concord

### "Of Good Works"

#### *Introduction*

1. Luther had died on February 18, 1546 amid relative calm and peace. He left behind a healthy and robust Lutheran church, supported by the princes and loved by the people. Barely fifteen months later little was left. Elector John Frederick the Magnanimous was imprisoned and under the sentence of death. Duke Ernest of Lüneburg and Landgrave Philip of Hesse were likewise captured and imprisoned. The university at Wittenberg was closed, its faculty dispersed to the winds. Mühlberg and Torgau were no longer in Lutheran hands. On May 23, 1547 the Emperor Charles V occupied Wittenberg itself without firing a shot. Standing at the grave of Luther in the Castle Church, the emperor was urged to exhume the body of "the heretic," to burn his bones and scatter them in the Elbe. "*I do not make war with the dead,*" he exclaimed – though it was certainly within his power to do so, so complete was his victory. Soon all of southern Germany and, with a few cities excepted, all of northern Germany would fall to the forces of the pope and emperor.

2. With political turmoil came also theological strife. Once the voice of Luther had been silenced, the secret enemies and false brothers of Lutheranism were emboldened to display their true colors and allegiance. "*Coming out in the open with their pernicious errors, they caused numerous controversies which spread over all Germany..., and threatened to undo completely the blessed work of Luther, to disrupt and disintegrate the Church, or to pervert it into a unionistic or Reformed sect.*"<sup>1</sup>

3. How did things get to this point so quickly, that so soon after Luther's death, Lutheranism was at the verge of collapse from within and extermination from without? It is a story of doctrinal weakness and political vacillation; of traitors in both the theological and political realms. In light of all this, it is a miracle of God's grace, not only that the Lutheran church survived, but that the Formula of Concord was ever written and unity restored to the church of Luther.

4. Luther himself saw all this coming. In a sermon preached just before his departure to Eisleben to settle the dispute between the Counts of Mansfeld, Luther had warned his Wittenberg congregation of the strife that was to come after his death:

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<sup>1</sup> Bente, F. *Historical Introduction to the Book of Concord*. Concordia Triglotta. (electronic ed.) Milwaukee WI: Northwestern Publishing House. p 93.

Up to this time you have heard the real, true Word; now beware of your own thoughts and wisdom. The devil will kindle the light of reason and lead you away from the faith, as he did the Anabaptists and Sacramentarians ... I see clearly that, if God does not give us faithful preachers and ministers, the devil will tear our church to pieces by the fanatics (*Rottengeister*), and will not cease until he has finished. Such is plainly his object. If he cannot accomplish it through the Pope and the Emperor, he will do it through those who are [now] in doctrinal agreement with us ... Therefore pray earnestly that God may preserve the Word to you, for things will come to a dreadful pass.<sup>2</sup>

5. It did not take divine inspiration for Luther to prophesy like this. He knew his theologians, the faculty at Wittenberg – where their weaknesses lay, who was imbued with a spirit of compromise, whose pride and ambition would spell trouble in later years. While he was alive, Luther, for the most part, was able to restrain these forces by the sheer force of his personality. (One notable exception was John Agricola, whose pride, ambition, duplicity, compromising spirit and theological weakness Luther could no longer tolerate. He finally in 1540 refused to have anything more to do with "Master Grickel," as Luther was accustomed to call him.)<sup>3</sup> Once Luther was gone, however, there was nothing holding these destructive forces back.

6. The controversy we examine today was named for George Major, a coworker of both Luther and Melanchthon at Wittenberg. However, as Bente points out in his *Historical Introduction to the Symbolical Books*, "Though not personally mentioned and attacked by the opponents of Majorism, Melanchthon must be regarded as the real father also of this controversy."<sup>4</sup>

7. Since, however, the Majoristic controversy came about as a direct result of the Augsburg and Leipzig Interims, we need to have some idea of how the imperial and papal politics influenced this troubling time.

### *I. The Political Scene Leading Up to the Formula*

8. The Lutheran princes and electors had formed a defensive alliance called the Smalcald League to repel any aggression against the Lutheran cause. Up until the death of Luther, it was hardly necessary since

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<sup>2</sup> IBID. p. 93.

<sup>3</sup> In the crisis that befell Lutheranism Agricola believed that he successfully had composed the differences between the Lutherans and Roman Catholics, even going so far as absurdly claiming in 1547 to have reformed the Pope and converted the Emperor to the Lutheran faith. "I go forth as the Reformer of all Germany," he boasted as he left Berlin to attend the Diet of Augsburg in 1547. (Bente, F. Historical Introduction, page 95.)

<sup>4</sup> IBID. p. 112.

the emperor was kept busy with the threat of the Turk and other dissension within his empire. But now all this fell away and he was ready finally to join hands with the pope to crush the heretics of Germany by brute force.

9. Charles must have been surprised at the ease with which he won the Smalcald War. Resistance was mild and ineffective. Too many of the Lutheran princes, like Joachim II of Brandenburg, decided to maintain their neutrality. The League hesitated to attack, even though a first strike would have soundly defeated the emperor who had not yet assembled his troops. But perhaps most disappointing was the defection of Maurice (a.k.a. Moritz), the Duke of Saxony, to the emperor's side. This "Judas of Meissen"<sup>5</sup> agreed to join forces against the Lutherans in exchange for the Electorate of Saxony, held by his uncle, John Frederick. In addition, Philip of Hesse deserted the Lutheran cause in exchange for the emperor's promise that he would receive immunity from punishment for his bigamy. (The emperor did not keep his end of the bargain and imprisoned Philip anyway.) The decisive battle was fought at Mühlberg on the Elbe River on April 24, 1547 and resulted in the total collapse of the Smalcald League.

10. After the defeat of the Smalcald League, the emperor Charles was determined to force the Lutherans back to the obedience of the pope. On May 15, 1548 he proclaimed as law the so-called Augsburg Interim. Written by papal bishops Julius Pflug and Michael Helding, and Luther's former friend John Agricola (see above), the Augsburg Interim was intended to regulate all church matters until the Council of Trent (1545-1563) could settle all the controversies between the Lutherans and Rome. In the Augsburg Interim the handwriting was already on the wall as to how these controversies were to be decided. All were forbidden – under severe penalty – to teach, preach, or write against the document.

11. As might be expected, the Interim conceded little to the Lutheran cause and essentially demanded a return to all romish customs and ceremonies. (The Lutheran clergy were granted the right to marry and to celebrate the Lord's Supper under both kinds but nothing else.) All doctrines were to be understood in the Catholic sense, the supremacy of the pope and bishops was affirmed, and the jewel of the Reformation, the doctrine of justification by faith alone, was either denied or obscured.

12. Severe persecution followed. Those who refused to accept the terms of the Interim were treated as rebels against the emperor. Pastors were deposed, banished, imprisoned and some even executed. In spite of the severity with which it was enforced (or maybe because of it) the Augsburg Interim soon became a dead letter throughout most of Germany, for good Lutheran folk simply would not accept such treatment of

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<sup>5</sup> Bente, F. Historical Introduction., op. cit., p. 101

their pastors. *"The churches in Augsburg, Ulm, and other cities stood empty as a silent protest against the Interim and imperial tyranny."*<sup>6</sup>

13. Maurice, who had quickly been reviled as a turncoat and traitor, recognized that the Augsburg Interim was too harsh for the Lutherans to accept. He prevailed upon Philip Melanchthon and George Major to write a milder, yet also compromised, document which Maurice could introduce in his territories. Known as the Leipzig Interim,<sup>7</sup> it satisfied no one. The Roman Catholics, who refused to accept the Augsburg Interim because it did not go far enough, would certainly not subscribe to this weakened position. Nor could the Lutherans be expected to accept its reintroduction of Romish customs and practices. One wonders how Melanchthon and Major ever imagined that such a document could compose such serious differences. Rather than quieting the waters, the Leipzig Interim became the stone of offense that, tossed into the Lutheran pool, caused wave after wave of doctrinal controversy to sweep over the Lutheran church. Ultimately, three of these controversies – the Adiaphoristic, the Majoristic, and the Synergistic – would be settled by the Formula of Concord.

14. When Maurice, bowing to public criticism, reversed his course and returned to the Lutheran cause in 1552, he caught the emperor without his army at Innsbruck, Austria and quickly defeated him. The former traitor was now hailed as the "Champion of Protestantism" as he entered the city of Augsburg. The Lutheran princes soon took control of the German lands again, forcing the emperor to seek a diplomatic end to the hostilities. An era of political peace began with the signing of the treaty known as the Peace of Augsburg (1555). This granted legal recognition to the Lutheran faith and established the curious rule of "cuius regio, eius religio" ("whoever's region, his religion").

## *II. The Main Players in the Majoristic Controversy*

### **George Major**

15. George Major was born April 25, 1502 at Nuremberg. At the age of nine he was sent to Wittenberg, and in 1521 entered the university there. In 1529 he was appointed rector of the Johannisschule in Magdeburg. By 1539 he was back in Wittenberg as court preacher after being ordained by Luther. In 1545 he was granted a professorship in the theological faculty of Wittenberg, where his authority continued to increase.

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<sup>6</sup> Bente, F. Historical Introduction, op. cit., page 96.

<sup>7</sup> The Leipzig Interim is critical for the understanding of the controversies settled by the Formula of Concord.

16. Like Melanchthon, he fled before the disastrous close of the Smalcaldic War, and found refuge in Magdeburg. In the summer of 1547 he returned to Wittenberg and in the same year became cathedral superintendent at Merseburg, although he assumed his duties at the university in the following year.

17. In the negotiations of the Interim he sided with Melanchthon, first opposing it and then later making concessions. He helped to write the Leipzig Interim.

18. Luther had his doubts about several of the Wittenberg theologians, including Major:

It was, above all, the spirit of indifferentism toward false doctrine, particularly concerning the Lord's Supper, which Luther observed and deplored in his Wittenberg colleagues: Melanchthon, Bugenhagen, Cruciger, Eber, and Major. Shortly before his last journey to Eisleben he invited them to his house, where he addressed to them the following solemn words of warning: They should "remain steadfast in the Gospel; for I see that soon after my death the most prominent brethren will fall away. I am not afraid of the Papists," he added, "for most of them are coarse, unlearned asses and Epicureans; but *our brethren* will inflict the damage on the Gospel; for 'they went out from us, but they were not of us' (1 John 2, 19); they will give the Gospel a harder blow than did the Papists."<sup>8</sup>

19. In a final conversation shortly before his death, Luther took Major to task in a very direct way for hiding behind a cloak of silence, and thereby bringing suspicion down upon himself and his doctrinal stand:

About the same time Luther had written above the entrance to his study: "Our professors are to be examined on the Lord's Supper." When Major, who was about to leave for the colloquy at Regensburg, entered and inquired what these words signified, Luther answered: "The meaning of these words is precisely what you read and what they say; and when you and I shall have returned, an examination will have to be held, to which you as well as others will be cited." Major protested that he was not addicted to any false doctrine. Luther answered: "It is by your silence and cloaking that you cast suspicion upon yourself. If you believe as you declare in my presence, then speak so also in the church, in public lectures, in sermons, and in private conversations, and strengthen your brethren, and lead the erring back to the right path, and contradict the contumacious spirits; otherwise your confession is sham pure and simple, and worth nothing. Whoever really regards his doctrine, faith and confession as true, right, and certain cannot remain in the same stall with such as teach, or adhere to, false doctrine; nor can he keep on giving friendly words to Satan and his minions. A teacher who remains silent when errors are taught, and nevertheless pretends to be a true teacher, is worse than an open fanatic and by his hypocrisy does greater damage than a heretic. Nor can he be trusted. He is a wolf and a fox, a hireling and a servant of his belly, and ready to despise and to sacrifice doctrine, Word, faith, Sacrament, churches, and schools. He is either a secret bedfellow of the enemies or a skeptic and a weathervane, waiting to see whether Christ or the devil will prove victorious; or he has no convictions of his own whatever, and is not

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<sup>8</sup> Bente, F. op. cit. p 94.

worthy to be called a pupil, let alone a teacher; nor does he want to offend anybody, or say a word in favor of Christ, or hurt the devil and the world.”(Walther, 39f.)<sup>9</sup>

### Nikolaus von Amsdorf

20. Nikolaus von Amsdorf was born on December 3, 1483 at Torgau. (His mother was a sister of Johannes von Staupitz,<sup>10</sup> Luther’s early confidant). In 1500 he began his studies at the University of Leipzig but two years later transferred to the newly founded school at Wittenberg, where he was among its first students. There he eventually fell under the influence of Luther. Less than a month younger than Luther, Amsdorf was more than just Luther’s contemporary. They were kindred spirits whose lives bore the marks of a deep, intimate and lifelong friendship.

21. Luther trusted Amsdorf completely and valued his opinions and advice. When called to the Leipzig Disputation in 1519, Luther took Amsdorf along. On April 2, 1521, with the imperial herald Kaspar Sturm leading the way, the now excommunicated monk left Wittenberg to stand before the emperor’s Diet. In the wagon with Luther was Amsdorf *“who would as Squire Jerome go with the new Hus to be burned, for he had no safe-conduct, which touching faithfulness Luther never forgot.”*<sup>11</sup> Though it is unclear whether Luther knew in advance that he would be “kidnaped” following the Diet, it seems Amsdorf was privy to that ultra-secretive plan, though he did not know where Luther would be taken.

22. The trust and love between these men never wavered. Rather it continued to grow. In 1520 Luther dedicated the forward of his Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation *“to the Esteemed and Reverend Master NICHOLAS VON AMSDORF, Licentiate of holy Scripture and Canon at Wittenberg, my special and kind friend.”* When Carlstadt and the Zwickau prophets took advantage of Luther’s seclusion at the Wartburg to throw Wittenberg into dissension and chaos, Luther returned briefly in December, 1521 to meet secretly with the theologians. He chose as meeting place the home of Amsdorf, perhaps the one man he knew he could trust. While Katherine von Bora refused to consider marriage to Dr. Kaspar Glatz, a man Luther was promoting, she did confide to Amsdorf that she would consider marrying either him or Dr.

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<sup>9</sup> IBID.

<sup>10</sup> Bautz, Friedrich Wilhelm. Biographisch-Bibliographisches Kirchenlexicon. Erlag Traugott Bautz (www.bautz.de/bbkl). Band I (1990) Spalten 152-154 .

<sup>11</sup> Dallmann, W. "Luther Praised by Catholics." Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. (1998). Vol. 47: Wisconsin Lutheran quarterly, Volume 47 (electronic edition.). Logos Library System; Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly (Page 315). Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House.

Luther.<sup>12</sup> Amsdorf faithfully passed on Katie's proposal to Luther with good result. Later, on May 5, 1529 Luther asked Amsdorf to be god-father for his newborn daughter, Magdalena.<sup>13</sup> And Luther again turned to Amsdorf and asked him to meet in Eisenach to give his advice concerning the prickly problem of the adulteries and bigamy of Landgrave Philip of Hesse.

23. In 1524 Amsdorf became pastor and bishop of Magdeburg where he was successful in planting the Reformation. Here, interestingly enough, he and George Major served together at a time when the Papists in that city wanted the Lutherans put to death because they denied that *"good works are necessary to salvation."*<sup>14</sup><sup>15</sup>

24. From the very beginning Amsdorf was firmly committed to the orthodox Lutheran faith, and *"fierce in his attacks on such men as Melancthon and Bucer who came to represent a policy of conciliation and compromise both within the Protestant Church and toward the Roman Catholic princes."*<sup>16</sup>

25. In 1541 the Elector John Frederick appointed Amsdorf bishop of Naumburg-Weitz, rejecting the moderate Roman Catholic Julius Pflug whom the religious order had chosen, and over the objections of the emperor. After the defeat of the Smalcald League at Mühlberg in 1547, Amsdorf was forced to leave Naumburg and flee to Weimar. From there he helped found a new university at Jena since he could not tolerate the unionistic tendencies he saw in force at Wittenberg. In that same spirit he took upon himself the task of producing the Jena edition of Luther's Works to correct what he considered faults and omissions in the Wittenberg edition.

26. In the controversies that overtook the Lutheran church after the death of Luther, Amsdorf belonged to the staunchly orthodox group known as the Gnesio Lutherans and took an active part in several

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<sup>12</sup> Schwiebert, E.G. Luther and His Times. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House. 1950. p. 587.

<sup>13</sup> *"Honorable, reverend Sir: God, the Father of all grace, has graciously presented a baby daughter to me and my dear Katie. I am therefore asking Your Honor for God's sake to assume a Christian office, to be the spiritual father of the said little heathen, and to help her to the holy [Christian faith] through the heavenly, precious sacrament of baptism. Thus you would be the catechist of my daughter."* Luther, M. (1999, c1972). Vol. 49: Luther's works, vol. 49 : Letters II (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works (Vol. 49, Page 218-219). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

<sup>14</sup> Kolb, Robert & Wengert, Timothy (Editors). *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. 2000. p. 574, fn 137.

<sup>15</sup> "Thus, Amsdorf could only believe that Major consciously and intentionally was embracing an important part of the Roman Catholic objection to Luther's teaching when he advocated the use of these statements. (Kolb & Wengert. op. cit. p. 574, fn 137.)

<sup>16</sup> Schaff, Philipp. The New Schaff-Herzog Religious Encyclopedia. (Amsdorf, Nikolaus Von:) page 159.



of the controversies dealt with by the Formula of Concord. *"To the Gnesio-Lutherans after Luther's death, he was esteemed as Elisha, whom Elijah had left behind, as the 'second Luther.'"*<sup>17</sup>

27. From 1554-1559 he was engaged in a fierce battle with Justus Menius, superintendent at Gotha, concerning the proper place of good works in relation to salvation. Under the stress of the battle, Amsdorf slipped over the precipice and assumed the extreme position that *"goods works are injurious to salvation,"* a statement that Melancthon characterized as *"filthy language."* Though there was no doubt that Amsdorf meant the words in a correct and orthodox Lutheran way, the statement on its face could not be maintained and was rejected by Article IV of the Formula of Concord.

28. He died at Eisenach on May 14, 1565 a man of 82 years who had rendered invaluable service to the Lutheran cause, especially in its early years. His one faux pas – committed in the heat of battle and hardly reflecting his actual theology – should not taint the memory of this man of God.

### *III. The Controversy Over Good Works*

#### *Melancthon Fathers the Error*

29. It is not difficult to see that the controversy in question strikes at the very heart of Luther's theology, the *sola fide* of justification. In the second edition of his dogmatics textbook, *Loci Communes* (1535), Melancthon called good works the *"causa sine qua non"* of salvation and introduced the phrase *"Good works are necessary to salvation."* He explained: *"Causa sine qua non* was nothing, nor is it a constituent part, but merely something without which the effect does not occur."<sup>18</sup> He further explained: *"Nevertheless, good works are necessary to eternal life, inasmuch as they must necessarily follow reconciliation."*<sup>19</sup>

30. In 1536 Caspar Cruciger, Sr. used Melancthon's faulty phrase in one of his lectures in Wittenberg. Immediately he was attacked by Cordatus, and before long by Amsdorf who reported it to Luther. Soon Cruciger admitted that the phrase was Melancthon's.

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<sup>17</sup> "Den Gnesiolutheranern galt er nach Luthers Tod als der Elisa, den Elia zurückgelassen hatte, als der »zweite Luther.«" Bautz, Friedrich Wilhelm. op. cit.

<sup>18</sup> Bente, F. op. cit. p. 113.

<sup>19</sup> IBID.

31. In October, 1536 Luther reportedly weighed in on the matter saying, "*This is the very theology of Erasmus, nor can anything be more opposed to our doctrine.*" And he added that this was "*tantamount to treading Christ and his blood under our feet.*"<sup>20</sup>

32. In private Luther repeatedly discussed this matter with Melanchthon and Melanchthon agreed to modify "*whatever I can.*" But it soon became evident that Melanchthon was not cured of his error. In the 1538 edition of his *Loci*, he wrote, "*And nevertheless this new spiritual obedience is necessary to eternal life.*"<sup>21</sup> Either Melanchthon did not understand what was at stake here and why Luther so objected to it, or he was not convinced that his phraseology was incorrect. At any rate, it seems he believed that the merely cosmetic change from "*good works*" to "*this new spiritual life*" would somehow satisfy his critics. In the *Loci* of 1543 he dropped the words "*to salvation*" from the phrase but maintained the error in a more subtle form, namely that good works are necessary "*to retain faith.*"

33. Two years later, in the Leipzig Interim of 1548 (which Melanchthon helped write) the false teaching concerning the necessity of good works for salvation was fully restored:

Although God does not justify man by the merit of his own works which man does, but out of mercy, freely, without our merit, that the glory may not be ours, but Christ's, through whose merit alone we are redeemed from sins and justified, yet the merciful God does not work with man as with a block, but draws him, so that his will also co-operates if he be of understanding years. For such a man does not receive the benefits of Christ unless his will and heart be moved by prevenient grace, so that he is terrified before God's wrath and has dislike of sin.<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, the new virtues and good works are so highly necessary that if they were not quickened in the heart there would be no reception of divine grace....<sup>23</sup>

...As, now, this true knowledge must shine in us, it is certainly true that these virtues, faith, love, hope and others, must be in us, and are necessary to salvation. All this is easy for the godly to understand who seek to experience consolation from God.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> IBID.

<sup>21</sup> Bente, F. op. cit. p. 114.

<sup>22</sup> Jacobs, Henry. Historical Introduction, Appendixes and Indexes to the Book of Concord. Vol II. Decatur, Illinois: The Johann Gerhard Institute. 1908 (reprinted in 1996), p. 292.

<sup>23</sup> Jacobs, Henry. op. cit. p. 297.

<sup>24</sup> IBID.

34. The renewal of this obnoxious phrase in the Interim resulted directly in the Majoristic Controversy concerning good works. Here George Major stepped to the fore, while Melanchthon retreated. "Moreover, he (Melanchthon) now advised Major and others to abstain from using the phrase: Good works are necessary to salvation, because, said he, *'this appendix [to salvation, ad salutem] is interpreted as merit, and obscures the doctrine of grace.'*"<sup>25</sup>

35. From this time Melanchthon often repudiated the phrase which he had originally introduced and warned others not use it. *"Nowhere, however, did he reject it or advise against its use because it was inherently erroneous and false as such, but always merely because it was subject to abuse and misapprehension, – a qualified rejection which self-evidently could not and did not satisfy his opponents."*<sup>26</sup>

### *Major Champions the Error*

36. In 1551 Amsdorf published a tract denouncing Bugenhagen and Major for their connection with the Leipzig Interim of 1548. In this publication Major, in particular, received the brunt of Amsdorf's attack – that he had omitted the word "sola" from the "sola fide" of justification, and that he had instead emphasized that good works and Christian virtues are meritorious and necessary to salvation.

37. In his reply, Major refused to accept responsibility for the Interim and said that he had never doubted justification "by faith alone." But then he cast down the gauntlet:

I do confess that I have hitherto taught, and still teach, and henceforth will teach all my life: that good works are necessary to salvation. And I declare publicly and with clear and plain words that no one is saved by evil works, and also, that no one is saved without good works. Furthermore I say, let him who teaches otherwise, even though an angel from heaven, be accursed (*der sei verflucht*)!<sup>27</sup>

38. One finds totally lacking in these statements the humility of an Augustine, who commented "I cannot be a heretic, for I am willing to be instructed." It comes as no surprise, then, that Major's defiant attitude was firmly opposed by Amsdorf, Flacius, Gallus, Wigand, Moerlin, and Chemnitz. Amsdorf especially would have found these comments troubling, and in particular, the claim that he had always taught this way. Some thirty years earlier, they had served together in Magdeburg and had faced the ire of the Papists because they would not agree to this very phrase, that "good works are necessary to salvation."

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<sup>25</sup> Bente, F. op. cit. p. 114.

<sup>26</sup> Bente, F. op. cit. p. 115.

<sup>27</sup> IBID.

Combined with Major's complicity in the writing of the Leipzig Interim, this statement must have led Amsdorf to question Major's loyalty at Magdeburg back in 1524 and to believe that Major now was consciously and deliberately returning to the romanist view of justification.

### *Menius Sides With Major*

39. Major, however, did not stand alone. He was soon joined by Justus Menius (b. 1499) of Gotha, who in 1556 taught that "the beginning of the new life in believers is necessary to salvation."<sup>28</sup> That same year he was suspended from his office as superintendent of Gotha and brought before the Synod of Eisenach to answer for this teaching. There he agreed to sign seven propositions in which the teaching that good works are necessary to salvation, or to retain salvation, was rejected. Menius soon, however, proved the old proverb true:

A man convinced against his will;  
Is of the same opinion still.

40. Resentful and hurt, and now dissatisfied with the now intolerable situation in Gotha, Menius resigned. He soon moved to Leipzig where he wrote three "*violently polemical books*" in which "*he freely vented his long pent-up feelings of anger and animosity, especially against Flacius.*"<sup>29</sup>

41. In these writings, Menius denied ever having used Major's formula. "*However he not only refused to reject it but defended the same error, though in somewhat different terms.*"<sup>30</sup> He simply replaced the words "*good works*" with "*new obedience*" or "*new life.*" He also began to state that good works are necessary in order "*to retain salvation.*" While he was willing to admit that both his and Major's propositions could be misunderstood, and that therefore he counseled others not to use them, he nevertheless refused to admit that they were, on their very face, false and heretical.

42. With the exception of a few in Electoral Saxony, Major and Menius were opposed by Lutheran theologians virtually everywhere, and especially by Amsdorf, Flacius, Wigand, Gallus, Moerlin and Chemnitz.

In their publications they unanimously denounced the proposition that good works are necessary to salvation, and its equivalents, as dangerous, godless, blasphemous, and popish.

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<sup>28</sup> Quoted by Bente, F. op. cit. p. 117.

<sup>29</sup> Bente, F. op. cit. p. 118.

<sup>30</sup> IBID.

Yet before the controversy they themselves had not all nor always been consistent and correct in their terminology.<sup>31</sup>

The *Formula of Concord* says: Before this controversy quite a few pure teachers employed such and similar expressions [that faith is preserved by good works, etc.] in the exposition of the Holy Scriptures, in on way, however, intending thereby to confirm the above-mentioned errors of the Papists. (949, 36)<sup>32</sup>

43. Flacius himself had used such inexact terminology, stating that the Christian's effort to obey God could be called a "*causa sine qua non or something which serves salvation*," [ad salutem]. The difference between Flacius and Major, though, was that when his formula was challenged, Flacius immediately recognized his error and amended his statements. Major could never bring himself to say that his formula was incorrect but only that it could be misunderstood. In reality, however, it was not a problem of interpretation. "*Major's proposition taken as it reads can be interpreted only in a papistic sense, and no amount of explanations is able to cure it of its ingrained falsity.*"<sup>33</sup>

44. In 1558 Major promised no longer to use the offending phrases. He did this, though, not because he was convinced of his error but only because others did not understand it correctly, and because he wanted to end the controversy. Obviously, this was not acceptable to his opponents, who demanded a public admission of his error and a complete repudiation of the offending statements. To accept less would have compromised the truth and jeopardized the entire doctrine of justification.

The Formula of Concord, however, ...flatly rejected the false and dubious formulas of Melancthon, Major, and Menius concerning the necessity of good works to salvation, and fully restored Luther's doctrine. Luther's words concerning good works are quoted as follows: "We concede indeed that instruction should be given also concerning love and good works, yet in such a way that this be done when and where it is necessary, namely, when otherwise and outside of this matter of justification we have to do with works. But here the chief matter dealt with is the question not whether we should also do good works and exercise love, but by what means we can be justified before God and saved. And here we answer with St. Paul: that we are justified by faith in Christ alone, and not by the deeds of the Law or by love. Not that we hereby entirely reject works and love, as the adversaries falsely slander and accuse us, but that we do not allow ourselves to be led away, as Satan desires, from the chief matter, with which we have to do here, to another and foreign affair, which does not at all belong to this matter. Therefore, whereas and as long as we are occupied with this article of justification, we reject and condemn works, since this article is

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<sup>31</sup> IBID.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted by Bente, F. op. cit. p. 118.

<sup>33</sup> Bente, F. op. cit. p. 119.

so constituted that it can admit of no disputation or treatment whatever regarding works. Therefore in this matter we cut short all Law and works of the Law." (925, 29.)<sup>34</sup>

45. So Bente adds:

The statement, "Good works are necessary to salvation," however, does not admit of such treatment. It is inherently false and cannot be cured by any amount of explanation or interpretation. Because of this inherent falsity it must be rejected as such. Logically and grammatically the phrase, "Good works are necessary to salvation," reverses the correct theological order, by placing works before faith and sanctification before justification. It turns things topsy-turvy. It makes the effect the cause; the consequent, the antecedent, and *vice versa*.<sup>35</sup>

### *Amsdorf Slips Up*

46. A most unfortunate chapter in the history of this controversy was introduced by the actions and statements of Nikolaus Amsdorf. So zealous was he to defend the doctrine of justification against the false statements of Major and Menius that he fell in to an opposite, and equally erroneous, position. Over against Menius' and Major's proposition that "*good works are necessary to salvation*," Amsdorf foolishly asserted that "*good works are injurious to salvation*."

47. At first blush, one wonders how a gifted and experienced theologian, as Amsdorf surely was, could make such a statement. Would not most of our grade school catechists be able to sense that something is amiss here?

48. Perhaps the easiest way to explain Amsdorf's folly is to quote the old adage: "He couldn't see the forest for the trees." Amsdorf was so involved with the details – with the individual words – and thinking two steps ahead of himself, that he did not consider how the complete proposition would sound, how the bare words would read. Obviously it was not his intention to say that good works are bad and dangerous, in and of themselves, but only if one tries to insert them into the article of salvation. For that reason he added the words "*ad salutem, to salvation*." "*By this appendix he meant to emphasize that good works are dangerous when introduced as a factor in justification and trusted in for one's salvation.*"<sup>36</sup> For, as Luther often taught, good works are injurious to salvation, "*if one puts his trust in them*."

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<sup>34</sup> Quoted by Bente, F. op. cit. p. 121.

<sup>35</sup> Bente, F. op. cit. p. 122.

<sup>36</sup> IBID.

49. When the bare sense of the wording was pointed out to Amsdorf, he embarrassingly acknowledged the falsity of the statement and explained what he *meant* to say. The matter might have ended there without further consequence, except for the fact that Amsdorf had included the proposition in the title of his tract,<sup>37</sup> and that Melancthon and Major jumped on his infelicitous language.

50. "The *Formula of Concord* most emphatically rejects the error of Amsdorf (the bare statement that good works are injurious to salvation) 'as offensive and detrimental to Christian discipline.' And justly so; for the question was not what Amsdorf meant to say: but what he really did say."<sup>38</sup>

### *Other Disputes*

51. From the beginning of the Reformation (and up to the present day) the Papists have charged that the Lutheran church condemns good works and denies their necessity. A similar charge was made by the adherents of Major against their opponents in this controversy. "*If good works are not necessary to salvation, they cannot be necessary at all.*"<sup>39</sup>

52. Johannes Wigand responded: "*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.*" (Planck 4, 498. 544.)<sup>40</sup>

53. At this point the Antinomians, and especially John Agricola, entered the fray. They objected to the statement, "*Good works are necessary.*" In their opinion such a statement implied compulsion and coercion which was extorted by fear of punishment and was therefore "*unevangelical and semipopish.*"<sup>41</sup> Against this extreme position the Formula of Concord maintains that the use of the words "must," "should," and "necessary" are not contrary to sound teaching but, used correctly, refer to the obedience which the regenerate owe to God and which are done out of love for God.

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<sup>37</sup> The tract was entitled: "That this Proposition, "Good works are injurious to salvation," is a correct, true, Christian proposition, taught and preached by Sts. Paul and Luther."

<sup>38</sup> Bente, F. op. cit. p. 123.

<sup>39</sup> IBID.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted by Bente, F. op. cit. p. 123.

<sup>41</sup> IBID.

#### *IV. How the Formula Settled The Controversy*

54. To settle the controversy occasioned by Major and the Interim, Article IV of the Formula of Concord was written. (I have chosen to use the text of the "Solid" or "Thorough Declaration" rather than the outline presented in the Epitome for our study today. The reader is encouraged to review the affirmative and negative theses presented there.) Please note, however, that the "Thorough Declaration" does not follow the historical sequence but treats matters thematically. What follows is a brief summary of the article.

55. Article IV carefully addresses the issues, propositions, and statements which so troubled the Lutheran church – but it does so without mentioning names. It does this in order to remove "personality issues" from the discussion and instead concentrate on the Scriptural issues that were involved.

56. First it acknowledges the points over which there is no controversy among our theologians:
- "that it is God's will, order, and command that believers should walk in good works;"
  - that the good works of believers "are pleasing and acceptable to God for the sake of the Lord Christ, by faith, because the person is acceptable to God;"
  - "Therefore, of works that are truly good and well-pleasing to God, which God will reward in this world and in the world to come, faith must be the mother and source; and on this account they are called by St. Paul true *fruits of faith*, as also *of the Spirit*."
  - "that it is impossible to separate works from faith, yea, just as impossible as it is for heat and light to be separated from fire." (Here the Formula quotes Luther's famous words: "*It is a living, busy, active, powerful thing that we have in faith, so that it is impossible for it not to do good without ceasing. Nor does it ask whether good works are to be done; but before the question is asked, it has wrought them, and is always engaged in doing them, etc.*")

57. Secondly, it addresses the fact "that good works are **necessary**," that they "**necessarily** follow faith and reconciliation," "that we **necessarily** are to do and must do such good works as God has commanded, and that the Holy Scriptures themselves use the words *necessity*, *needful*, and *necessary*, likewise *ought* and *must*. (Emphasis mine.)

58. Therefore the statement that good works are necessary, is "used with propriety to rebuke and reject the secure, Epicurean delusion, by which many fabricate for themselves a dead faith without repentance and without good works, as though there could be in a heart true faith and at the same time the wicked intention to persevere and continue in sins, which is impossible."



59. "When this word *necessary* is employed, it should be understood not of coercion, but only of the ordinance of the immutable will of God, whose debtors we are." "The people of the New Testament are to be a *willing people*, Ps. 110, 3, and *sacrifice freely*, Ps. 54, 6, *not grudgingly or of necessity, but are to be obedient from the heart*, 2 Cor. 9, 7; Rom. 6, 17."

60. "But it is false, and must be censured, when it is asserted and taught" that "good works are free to believers in the sense that it is optional to do or to omit them."

61. "When it is taught that good works are necessary, it must also be explained why and for what reasons they are necessary."

62. "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.*"

- "For they are directly contrary to the exclusive particles in the article of justification and salvation, that is, they conflict with the words by which St. Paul has entirely excluded our works and merits from the article of justification and salvation, and ascribed everything to the grace of God and the merit of Christ alone." (Perhaps Eph 2:8,9 is meant here – "*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast.*")
- "they take from afflicted, troubled consciences the comfort of the Gospel,"
- "give occasion for doubt,"
- "strengthen presumption in one's own righteousness and confidence in one's own works;"
- "besides, they are accepted by the Papists, and used by them against the pure doctrine of the alone-saving faith."

63. "Accordingly, the aforesaid modes of speech should not be taught, defended, or excused, but be thrown out of our churches and repudiated as false and incorrect."

64. "Thirdly, since it is also disputed whether good works preserve salvation, we must also explain well and precisely how righteousness and salvation are preserved in us, lest it be lost again."

**To be rejected:**

- "that faith and righteousness and salvation cannot be lost again even though a person indulges his wicked lusts without fear and shame, resists the Holy Ghost, and purposely engages in sins against conscience."

- "that faith only in the beginning lays hold of righteousness and salvation, and then resigns its office to the works as though thereafter they had to sustain faith. St. Paul ascribes the beginning, middle, and end all *to faith alone*."
  - "Therefore the decree of the Council of Trent is justly to be rejected, namely, that our good works preserve salvation, or that even faith itself, is either entirely or in part kept and preserved by our works."
65. "Fourthly, as regards the proposition that good works are said to be injurious to salvation:
- If any one drags good works into the article of justification, or rests his righteousness or trust for salvation upon them, to merit God's grace and be saved by them, to such a man his 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 that we can 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 *propter veras causas et ad veros fines* (from true causes and for true ends).
  - For this reason, too, this proposition is censured and rejected in our churches, because as a flat statement it is false and offensive... For what is injurious to his salvation a person should avoid with the greatest diligence."

## *V. Lessons Learned and Applied*

### *Appreciate Sound Biblical Teaching*

66. In this matter of the relationship of faith to works, the Lutheran church has been assaulted on two different fronts, not only during the days of the *Formula* but also during our own day. On the one side is the Roman Catholic doctrine of prevenient grace, with its subsequent reliance on good works for salvation. It is often described in this way: God must first give his grace. That initial grace equips and leads you to do good works. Those good works earn more grace. That grace empowers you to do more good works, which earns you more grace, which does more good works, which earns... etc. Only in that sense can the Roman Catholic claim to be saved "by grace."

67. On the other side are the Reformed churches, which often teach something called "complete sanctification." If you've ever had someone tell you, after you confessed your faith in Christ, "Well, that's good but it's not enough," this is probably what they mean. Along with faith in Christ, you need the confirming works that can assure you that you really belong to Christ. And you need to continue to strive

more and more until finally your sanctification is complete, that is, perfect. How many times have you heard things like this: "If we admit to God that we have sinned, believe that Jesus Christ died for our sins and ask him to forgive us and take charge of our lives, then God will forgive our sins."<sup>42</sup> Or this: "When we have faith in Jesus, trust Him as our Savior **and turn away from sin**, our earthly life stays on track, and we are assured of an eternal home in heaven."<sup>43</sup> Though they claim to teach "salvation by grace, through faith," in reality they are mingling justification and sanctification, claiming along with Major that "good works are necessary to salvation" or that "good works preserve salvation." To such statements the *Formula* still speaks when it says, "*they take from afflicted, troubled consciences the comfort of the Gospel, give occasion for doubt, strengthen presumption in one's own righteousness and confidence in one's own works.*"

68. With an eye toward those who would serve in the pastoral ministry, Professor Carl Lawrenz of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary emphasized the need to keep sanctification out of the teaching of justification and yet to stress the necessity of works, following after salvation and freely given by God's people:

To this day many in Christianity still share George Major's 16th-century fear that if we overstress the scriptural doctrine of justification by grace alone, good works might be slighted. Major again set up the thesis: "Good works are necessary for salvation." With Scripture and with the Formula of Concord we need to put a period after "Good works are necessary." In all our teaching and preaching we want to keep works completely out of the article of our justification. The certainty of our salvation is at stake. In doing so, the good works which please God will not suffer. They will follow faith as inevitable fruits. They are necessary in the sense that they are not optional. God's immutable holy will is in effect also for His reborn children. At the same time they are free. They are rendered by God's believing children in a voluntary spirit and not by the driving and coercion of the law. Of course, because of our old Adam, our sanctification will always remain imperfect in this life. To help us in our struggle against our old Adam we Christians also need to hear the law, not only as a mirror and curb, but also as a guide. But just because our sanctification will never be perfect in this life, our sanctification must never be brought into the article of justification. Only in the perfect imputed righteousness of Christ can we stand in God's holy presence now and forever. These are all vital truths for today's Christian ministry. Outside of the Lutheranism which still clings to the Formula of Concord there is much confusion of justification and sanctification, of the Christ for us and the Christ in us.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Palau, Luis. *Decision* (magazine published by Billy Graham Evangelistic Association) Vol. 43, Number 4, April, 2002. p. 12.

<sup>43</sup> IBID.

<sup>44</sup> Lawrenz, Carl. "*Some Basic Apostolic Concerns Reflected in the Formula of Concord.*" Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. (1998). Vol. 74: Wisconsin Lutheran quarterly, Volume 74 (electronic edition.). Logos Library System; Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly (Pages 204-205). Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House.

***Teach Works Boldly***

69. Since the days of the Reformation, critics of the Lutheran church have maintained that the doctrine of justification by faith promotes a lazy Christianity, devoid of good works. Already in the Augsburg Confession (1530) and its Apology (1531), the Lutheran theologians felt it necessary to answer their critics. And answer them they did! It may surprise you to learn that *"more is written in our Confessions on the topic of good works and the Christian life than any other subject."*<sup>45</sup> In his Large Catechism Luther devotes more ink to his discussion of the Ten Commandments than all of the rest of the book combined. And Melanchthon, in the Apology, has a huge section (Article XX) devoted to the subject of love and good works in the life of a Christian (far more space than he devotes to the subject of justification itself). So Robert Preus states:

No Roman Catholic theologian ever spoke or wrote more emphatically, more clearly, more winsomely about sanctification and works of love than our Confessions. And no Roman Catholic theologian urged sanctification and good works and their value and how they please God more than Luther and our Confessions.<sup>46</sup>

70. That really should not surprise us. The Apostle Paul could speak most emphatically about the sinner's justification before God, denying works any place in that article ("and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works, etc," Eph 2:8,9). But then moving over to the teaching of sanctification, Paul was not shy about commanding good works: "created in Christ Jesus to do good works" (Eph 2:10), "wives submit to your husbands... husbands, love your wives"(Eph 5:22,25), "command those who are rich... to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share," (1 Tim 6:17, 18). Such directives and admonitions abound throughout the New Testament.

71. Luther, too, stressed the need for Christian preachers to proclaim both Law and Gospel, faith and works, but to keep them in balance and not preach one to the neglect of the other. Professor Armin Schuetze quotes Luther in this regard:

"Commenting on John 15:10-12 Luther writes:

'Wherever faith is not preached and is not given primary importance, wherever we do not begin by learning how we are united with Christ and become branches in Him, all the world concentrates only on its works. On the other hand, wherever faith alone is taught, this leads to false Christians, who boast of their faith, are baptized, and are counted among the Christians but give no evidence of fruit and strength. This makes it difficult to preach to people. No matter how one preaches, things go wrong; the people always hedge. If one does

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<sup>45</sup> Preus, Robert. *Getting into the Formula of Concord*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House. 1977. p. 73.

<sup>46</sup> IBID.

not preach on faith, nothing but hypocritical works result. But if one confines one's preaching to faith, no works ensue. In brief, the outcome is either works without faith or faith without works.'

Thus his advice is that the sermon must address itself to those who accept and apprehend both faith and works. So 'we preach to the little flock who know, and reflect on, their eternal destiny, whose chief concern is to remain in this Vine, who find all their consolation in Him, and who then also give practical proof of this in their conduct.' There is the proper balance."<sup>47</sup>

72. And this is the balance the Formula of Concord achieved.

### *Conclusion*

73. In what has been called Luther's favorite hymn, "Salvation Unto Us Has Come," Paul Speratus summarizes simply and purely the truth of this article (FC IV):

Faith clings to Jesus' cross alone  
And rests in him unceasing;  
And by its fruits true faith is known,  
With love and hope increasing.  
Yet faith alone doth justify,  
Works serve thy neighbor and supply  
The proof that faith is living.

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<sup>47</sup> Schuetze, Armin W. *"The Significance of the Reformation for our Ministry Today."* Lecture IV. Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. (1998). Vol. 83: Wisconsin Lutheran quarterly, Volume 83 (electronic edition.). Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly (Pages 199-200). Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House.

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