

*God Guides His Church Despite Doctrinal Problems Throughout the Centuries:
A Study of the Continuing Relevance of the Formula of Concord*

Article IV - Of Good Works: What are they really good for?

Introduction:

Your Catholic friend comes up to you and says, “I think I am going to join your church, because unlike the Catholic Church, you Lutherans don’t have to do good works.” How would you respond?

This question about good works and where they fit in is not something new that we have to deal with. The framers of the Formula of Concord had to deal with the same question when they put forth their confession of faith, to which we still subscribe today.

Historical Background:

When and where did this question first arise? We can really trace the root of the heresies about good works back to the Garden of Eden, but for our purposes we will look back to the year 1548, back to a document called the Leipzig Interim. This was put together in order to try to draw the Lutherans and Catholics closer together. What it actually did was compromise Lutheran doctrine. The reason this caused such a stir was that it omitted a four-letter Latin word: “sola.” The word “sola” means “alone,” and it was excluded from the statement that we are saved “by faith alone” (“sola fide”). This word was purposely omitted when talking about how a person is saved. Those who wrote it did this in order to leave room for interpretation.

As Lutherans, how would we answer? A person is saved by _____.

Titus 3:5 —

Romans 5:1 —

Omitting this word “sola” allowed both Catholics and Lutherans to agree on the statement that a person is saved by faith, but it left the door open so that the Catholic Church could add “together with works.”

Good works are necessary to salvation?

Even before the Leipzig Interim, there were problems with the theology of some. Philip Melancthon, Luther’s close associate, used the phrase “Good works are necessary to salvation.”¹ Others picked up on this phrase. One of his pupils, Caspar Cruciger, and another by the name of George Major used it as well. It is from this man that the controversy gets its name - Majoristic Controversy.

“The immediate cause of the public controversy concerning the question whether good works are necessary to salvation was George Major.”²

Major said, “I do confess that I have hitherto taught, and still teach, and hence forth 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 no one is saved without good works. Furthermore I say, let him who teaches otherwise, even though an angel from heaven, be accursed!”³

Was Major wrong in his wording or was it just that his words could be misunderstood by others? Explain.

Which phrase would you use? “Good works are necessary” or “Good works are necessary to/for salvation?” Why?

Think about what Luther said: “Faith alone justifies, but it is not alone.”⁴ Compare this with what Major said. Is there a difference? If so, what is it?

Major’s position was summed up by the framers of the Formula of Concord in this way:

*“Good works are necessary for salvation; it is impossible to be saved without good works; likewise, no one has been saved without good works; because, they say, good works are required of true believers as fruits of faith, and faith without love is dead, although such love is no cause of salvation.”*⁵

Define “good works”. Cf. Romans 14:23b, Matthew 25:40

When do good works take place?

“Nor does it (faith) 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.”⁶

Why do Christians even do good works? Cf. Romans 12:1

“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.”⁷

“It is God’s will, order, and command that believers should walk in good works; and that truly good works are not those which every one contrives himself from a good intention, or which are done according to traditions of men, but those which God Himself has prescribed and commanded in His Word . . . not from our own natural powers, but . . . when the person by faith is reconciled with God and renewed by the Holy Ghost.”⁸

We say that good works are necessary because they are commanded by God. So do we do them under coercion? Explain your answer.

“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.”⁹

Rather as God’s people we act:

Psalm 110:3 —

2 Corinthians 9:7 —

Psalm 54:6 —

Romans 6:17 —

“Good works should be done willingly or from a voluntary spirit by those whom the Son of God has made free.”¹⁰

“Good works are works that flow from faith and from the joy of heart that has come to us because we have forgiveness of sins through Christ.”¹¹

We are free to do good works, but this does not mean that they are optional. We cannot make the claim that we have faith and therefore do not need to do good works. Why not?

James 2:14-26 (esp. v.26) —

Matthew 3:8 —

“Many fabricate for themselves a dead faith or delusion which is 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; or, as though one could, indeed, have and retain true faith, righteousness, and salvation even though he be and remain a corrupt and unfruitful tree, whence no good fruits whatever come, yea, even though he persist in sins against conscience, or purposely engages again in these sins, - all of which is incorrect and false.”¹²

What church body or bodies teach similarly to what Major was teaching? Whose teaching really was/is it?

Once again, how is it that we are saved?

Ephesians 2:8-9 —

Galatians 3:26-27 —

“No one can merit the initial grace which is at the origin of conversion. Moved by the Holy Spirit, we can merit for ourselves and for others all the graces needed to attain eternal life, as well as necessary temporal goods.”¹³

What does it mean “to merit?”

Whose teaching is this? How does this compare with what George Major taught?

“There is no such thing as merit; but all are justified for nothing (*gratis*) and this is credited to no one but to the grace of God.”¹⁴

The quote eight lines above comes from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Even after 400 years, their doctrine has not changed. They still teach that “good works are necessary for salvation.”

Melanchthon struggled with this issue. He made a comment about that phrase quoted below. He calls good works “new obedience.”

“When it is said: *New obedience* is necessary to salvation, the Papists understand that good works merit salvation. This proposition is false; therefore I relinquish this mode of speech.”¹⁵

The Modern Catholic View:

“Alongside the radical purification brought about by Baptism or martyrdom they cite as means of obtaining forgiveness of sins: efforts at reconciliation with one’s neighbor, tears of repentance, concern for the salvation of one’s neighbor, the intercession of the saints, and the practice of charity ‘which covers a multitude of sins.’”¹⁶

“Moved by the Holy Spirit and by charity, *we can then merit* for ourselves and for others the graces needed for our sanctification . . . and for the attainment of eternal life.”¹⁷

From these two quotes, what does the Catholic Church teach that a believer can do?

Luther, drawing on his years of experience, reflected on what goes through the mind of a monk:

“By observing the sacred rules of my order I can earn the grace of congruence, but by the works I do after I have received this grace I can accumulate a merit so great that it will not only be enough to bring me to eternal life but enough to sell and give to others.”¹⁸

Yet the Scriptures teach:

Philippians 1:6 —

Romans 1:17 —

“Reading Sacred Scripture, praying the Liturgy of the Hours and the Our Father - every sincere act of worship or devotion revives the spirit of conversion and repentance within us and contributes to the forgiveness of our sins.”¹⁹

“The *penance* the confessor imposes must take into account the penitent’s personal situation and must seek his spiritual good. It must correspond as far as possible with the gravity and nature of the sins committed. It can consist of prayer, an offering, works of mercy, service of neighbor, voluntary self-denial, sacrifices, and above all the patient acceptance of the cross we must bear.”²⁰

What seems to be the most important thing for the Catholic Church when it comes to good works?

The Catholic Church would put more emphasis on the action done, rather than the heart that does the action. What do the Scriptures say about our actions apart from Christ?

Isaiah 64:6 —

When the Catholic Church insists that “good works are necessary for salvation, what are they really doing to a person? To their conscience?

“Again they (these propositions concerning the necessity of good works for salvation) take from afflicted, troubled consciences the comfort of the Gospel, give occasion for doubt, are in many ways dangerous, strengthen presumption in one’s own righteousness and confidence in one’s own works; besides, they are accepted by the Papists, and in their interest adduced against the pure doctrine of the alone-saving faith.”²¹

Consider now the question posed at the beginning of this class. How do you respond to the Catholic friend who tells you that she is going to join your church because the Lutherans don’t have to do good works?

“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), that is, in the sense in which God requires them of the regenerate, Philipians 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.”²²

Even after 400 years, the confession written by the framers of the Formula of Concord still applies for us today. Even though we march through time, the same temptations and controversies exist.

Sources Quoted

Catechism of the Catholic Church. Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1994.

Concordia Triglotta. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921.

Plass, Ewald M. *What Luther Says.* St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959.

¹ Bente §142, pg. 112

² Bente §144, pg. 115

³ Bente §144, pg. 115

⁴ Bente §147, pg. 120

⁵ FC Art. IV. P1, pg. 939

⁶ FC Art IV, P10, pg. 941

⁷ FC Art IV. P10, pg. 941

⁸ FC Art IV, P7, pg. 941

⁹ FC Art IV, P17, pg. 943

¹⁰FC Art, IV, P17, pg. 943

¹¹*What Luther Says*, §4847, pg. 1499

¹² FC Art. IV, P15, pg. 943

¹³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §2027, pg. 490

¹⁴ *What Luther Says*, §2890, pg. 921-922

¹⁵ Bente, §143, pg. 114

¹⁶ CCC, §1434, pg. 360

¹⁷ CCC, §2010, pg. 487

¹⁸ *What Luther Says*, §2886, pg. 921

¹⁹ CCC, §1437, pg. 361

²⁰ CCC, §1460, pg. 367

²¹ FC IV, P23, pg. 945

²² FC Art. IV, P38, pg. 951