

The Presentation of the Augsburg Confession (transferred)
St. John 15:1-11

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Articles IV, V, and VI form the crux of Lutheran doctrine and practice—you can read them on the back of your bulletins this morning. Everything else that is taught and believed in the Lutheran church is informed by what is espoused in these three articles. Why aren't they the first three articles? Basically because the first three—on God, Sin, and the Son of God—get you to these three. So, you can't have these three without those three, and on those three, most of Christianity agrees. Once you get to Articles IV, V, and VI, though, confessions and denominations diverge.

- Article IV states that man is justified freely before God on account of the Son of God and for His sake, and this through faith, apart from any works, strength, or the merits of his own. This faith is trust in God and a belief that one's sins are forgiven for Christ's sake by the all-atoning sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.
- Article V states that this faith is obtained by way of the Word of God being proclaimed to you, and that the Office of the Holy Ministry was especially instituted by God in order that you would have the Word proclaimed to you, hear of your sins forgiven, and that the means of grace would be given to you. Of chief importance, though, is that faith is obtained by way of the Word, as you heard in today's Epistle:

But how are they to call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?" So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. (Romans 10:14-17)

- Article VI states that good works that a Christian does are bound follow this gift of faith. These works are necessary—yes, they are required of you—but not insofar as they inform your justification or salvation, as was aforementioned.

Anything other than this is a perversion of Biblical doctrine and should be rejected as either heterodox—which can simply be understood as a different teaching held by anyone—or heretical—which would be an established, false teaching. Even the Augsburg Confession does this.

Scripture teaches salvation by grace, that works and being good avail nothing. You heard Luther say as much last week, but you heard it also in today's Gospel.

- Jesus said, "Apart from me you can do nothing." If that is true, and since Jesus is the Truth (cf. John 14:6), then it is true, then it holds that in order to have a part with Jesus, it's all on someone else, not you, that you have that part with Jesus. In keeping with the Vine and Branches theme that Jesus uses, you are grafted onto the Vine, Jesus, by the gardener—and it should go without saying that a branch neither grows apart from a vine nor is one grafted onto a vine by itself.
- Furthermore, there is this word from the pen of St. Paul: "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this [that is, faith] is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." (Ephesians 2:8-10)
- Additionally, when describing your state and condition before God before salvation, the Bible says that you were a dead man, stating that you were dead in your trespasses and sins. (cf. Ephesians 2:1, 5; Colossians 2:13) By way of the gift of faith, then, you have had a resurrection, as it were, to newness of life—a newness given to you in the waters of Holy Baptism. (cf. Romans 6:3-4) A dead man can no more wake himself from the dead as a child can choose to be born or adopted, which, by the way, are other words used to describe your coming to faith. (cf. John 3:3; 1 Peter 1:3, 23; Romans 8:15, 23; Galatians 4:5; Ephesians 1:5)

No one in history was saved because they were good. Last week, you confessed the Athanasian Creed, wherein you said, "At [Jesus' second] coming all men shall rise again with their bodies, and shall give an account of their own works. And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting; and they that have done evil, into everlasting fire." "They that have done good," are those who hold to the catholic (little-c) faith, which you also confessed last week, not those who work good toward salvation. As St. Paul recounted, "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one." (Romans 3:10b-12)

Nevertheless, good works are commanded, and as they are commanded, then you confess that they are necessary. What are they for? They are given to you in order that you may serve your neighbor. As Jesus once said, "The poor you always have with you." (John 12:8) A look throughout the Old Testament sees the commandment from God to care for the widow and the fatherless children inasmuch as the Children of Israel were to be a light to the Gentiles. That expectation continued with the New Testament church, and even unto today. Care for the widows. Care for the fatherless children. Care for the poor who are always with you. Love your neighbor as yourself. If you want to know what you can do to that is pleasing to God in heaven, this is it: serve your neighbor—this is the good work you have been given to do.

As if to underscore the necessity of these good works, St. James the Just, brother of Jesus, wrote,

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. (James 2:14-18)

So Jesus continued, "By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples." These kinds of works—without partiality, without seeking recognition, without compensation, and sometimes without the realization that you are doing anything, and without the hope of merit before God in heaven—prove your faith; prove your living faith. As was said before, though, these cannot be done apart from God and being in Christ. He gives them, you do them in Christ—apart from Him you can do nothing.

That's why Jesus said, "Every branch of mine that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit." Bearing fruit is the good works you are given to do. Those who don't bear fruit are taken away. And in doing the good works, you are continually pruned—a proclamation of Law and Gospel to you—that you may continue to bear fruit, and bear more, in fact!

Four times now you have heard me say that God has given these works to you. This is exactly as it was written by St. Paul. "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." (Ephesians 2:10)

Salvation is grace alone, which has been sufficiently demonstrated. And this comes to you by way of the Word of God alone, which has likewise been sufficiently demonstrated. What isn't mentioned in these two statements? Faith alone! It is faith alone which apprehends the grace of God proclaimed and distributed in the Word of God and makes it your own. Hence what Jesus said in today's Gospel: "Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you." By faith you believe that you are received into God's favor, and that your sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, who, by His death, has made satisfaction for your sins, just as you read in Article IV on the back of your bulletin. These three *Solas*—*sola gratia*, *sola fide*, *sola scriptura*—underlie everything confessed in these three articles of the Augsburg Confession.

As a branch on the Vine, Jesus Christ, you are continually refreshed and renewed by the Vine. His Word—verily, Jesus Christ Himself—is continually proclaimed to you. His Sacraments are often administered to you. And so you are kept grafted to the Vine, pruned and cared for that you may continue to produce the fruit that you have been given to produce. But you are already clean because of the Word that was spoken to you and into you—washed and sanctified for the sake of Christ, forgiven and redeemed and saved—and that is completely by the grace of God.

What are works in the face of such grace? How can your good works compare to the free salvation by God's grace? They can't! The moment you think of them as somehow meritorious, they are as a polluted rag, an unclean thing, as the prophet declared. (cf. Isaiah 64:6) They could never be meritorious for they are given by God to His children to do, and please Him only on account of Christ, through whom they are done! Besides, given the choice, would you help and serve your neighbor, or to his detriment, help and serve only yourself? Good or not, however, it is as Christ declared of these works, "So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'" (Luke 17:10)

No, the grace of God doesn't compare at all with works, especially when seen as meritorious. Since it is grace, it is a gift, not to be compared with works seen as meritorious. Since it is a gift, it is unearned and undeserved, freely given by God for the sake of Jesus Christ, who by His life, death, resurrection, and ascension performed the only meritorious work for salvation and redemption, and that once for all, when He gave His life on the cross as your ransom.

That's why Jesus said what He did. "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full." What sounds like a bunch of law is chock full of gospel. "Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you." You are clean for the sake of Christ, now go serve your neighbor, which you can do because you are already clean—that is, you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.