

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.

In the study of philosophy, there are a couple of concepts called *formal principle* and *material principle*. The formal principle refers to the ultimate source or rule used to define a belief or philosophical system. The material principle refers to the core teaching or governing doctrine of a belief or philosophical system. The terms and concepts not only apply to philosophy, but also to linguistics and theology.

In Lutheran theology, the formal principle is most simply put as Scripture alone. The implication there is that other theologies use other or additional sources to define their doctrine. For instance, in Roman Catholic theology, the formal principle is Scripture and tradition. This can cause difficulty in debating finer points of doctrine with theologians of different confessions if they don't or can't agree on a formal principle.

Lutheran theologians tend to balk at the idea of having a material principle. Some will like to point out that Scripture serves as both the formal and material principles in Lutheran theology. I like the idea, but I also acknowledge that doing so runs the risk of having too vague a material principle. To that end, you may have heard the statement that Article IV is the article on which the church stands or falls; this is referring to Article IV of the Augsburg Confession: "Also [our churches] teach that men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works, but are freely justified for Christ's sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor, and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, who, by His death, has made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God imputes for righteousness in His sight."

It is the article on justification. I would say that if you wanted to define a material principle in Lutheran theology, it is this: men are justified freely for Christ's sake through faith, the fourth article of the Augsburg Confession. The rest of Scripture, the doctrines contained therein, point forward or back to this article. Everything else believed, taught, and confessed in Lutheran theology is informed by this article.

For instance, I have maintained that along with Article IV, Articles V and VI form the crux of Lutheran doctrine and practice. As the Fourth informs everything else believed, taught, and confessed, the Fifth and Sixth help to flesh that all out. What of those other two articles?

- 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, else there wouldn't be any commandments—but being good, doing good works, doesn't save you. Faith is bound to bring forth good works, though.

Anything other than any of 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 rejects and calls out such heterodoxies and heresies.

Now, you may be wondering that if Articles IV, V, and VI are the core of Lutheran theology and practice—the material principle, if you will—why aren't they the first three articles of the Augsburg Confession? Those first three articles are on God, Original Sin, and the Son of God. They are the lead up to the next three articles, and the rest of the Augsburg Confession, for that matter. In order to get to the article on justification, you have to learn what it means to confess God, Original Sin, and the Son of God. On these first three points, all of Christendom agree, more-or-less, the differences being almost entirely semantic; but from there, the various confessions diverge. That divergence, I would argue, comes largely due to differences in formal principles among the different confessions.

So, the formal principle of Lutheran theology, Scripture, teaches salvation by grace, that works and being good avail nothing so far as it concerns earning salvation, because there is no one good or good enough to earn salvation, except the incarnate God-man, Jesus Christ.

- 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 used, 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 month, 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, 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—and if you want to know how, read the second table of the Ten Commandments, to start. Serving your neighbor 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 by 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 heard in Article IV earlier. These three *Solas*—*sola gratia*, *sola fide*, *sola scriptura*—underlie everything confessed in these three articles of the Augsburg Confession and espoused in today's Gospel.

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.

You are already clean! This is what is declared to you from the formal principle of Lutheran theology, Scripture alone, and apprehended for you by your God-given faith alone, won for you by Jesus Christ alone, by His life, death, resurrection, and ascension. And so you have exactly that which is the material principle of Lutheran theology: life, salvation, and the forgiveness all of your sins.

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