

**AUGSBURG TODAY:
THIS WE BELIEVE,
TEACH AND CONFESS**

Edited by David L. Mahsman

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ABBREVIATIONS

AC—Augsburg Confession

Ap—Apology of the Augsburg Confession

FC—Formula of Concord

LC—Large Catechism

SA—Smalcald Articles

SC—Small Catechism

SD—Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord

Tr—Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope

Numerals following the above abbreviations denote article numbers, except in the Smalcald Articles, where they refer to parts. In the Smalcald Articles, article numbers follow the comma after the part numbers. In all other cases, the numeral following the comma identifies the paragraph(s) from which the citation is taken.

INTRODUCTION

David L. Mahsman

“Whether it’s middle age or the coming millennium or a bad case of the blues, many Americans are on a quest for spiritual meaning.”
Newsweek, Nov. 28, 1994.

The “new” quest for spiritual satisfaction ought come as no surprise. Human beings are innately religious. God made us that way.

But where are seekers looking for spiritual satisfaction? Some, of course, look to Christianity in one form or another. Some explore religions of other cultures. Others wade into the New Age, goddess worship or seminars that present the concoctions of entrepreneurs who know an opportunity when they see one. Many seekers pick and choose beliefs and practices, cafeteria-style, to cook up a very personal religion.

While our American culture would have us believe that one person’s spiritual notions are just as valid as another’s, the apostle John takes a different tack: “Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1).

Left to our own devices, we are easily deceived. Left to our own devices, we can have no certainty about things spiritual.

But God does not leave us to our own devices. Rather, He has revealed Himself to us. Through Holy Scripture, He tells us about Himself and about ourselves. Jesus proclaimed in prayer to His heavenly Father, “Your word is truth” (John 17:17).

Because God’s Word is the only reliable and trustworthy source of spiritual truth, Lutherans historically have insisted that Christian teaching be derived only from Holy Scripture. It is not to be based, even in part, on human speculation or logic, on church tradition, or on personal feelings or experience. Thus the Reformation-era slogan, *Sola Scriptura*—Scripture alone.

This position is declared clearly in the Lutheran confessions, documents adopted by Lutherans of the 16th century to proclaim boldly their Christian faith and their understanding of Holy Scripture. Some or all of these 11 confessions—published together in 1580 as the *Book of Concord*—still are subscribed today by Lutheran pastors and church bodies worldwide.

They define what it means to be Lutheran.

One of the confessions, the Formula of Concord, begins with these words: “We believe, teach, and confess that the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments are the only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and teachers alike must be appraised

and judged, as it is written in Ps. 119:105, “Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”

As Lutherans, we seek to be faithful to Holy Scripture and to the Lutheran confessions as a correct exposition of God’s Word.

In this book, we will explore the principle teachings of Biblical Christianity under a common theme, “We Believe, Teach and Confess”

We begin with what God tells us in Scripture about His nature, how we can know Him and his creation of all that is—you and me included.

As we continue, our road map will be the first 21 articles of the Augsburg Confession. This is the chief confession of the Lutheran Church—written in 1530 and read to Emperor Charles V of the Holy Roman Empire as a statement of what Lutherans believe. Its first 21 articles deal with teachings of historic Christianity. The full text in translation is printed at the beginning of this book.

“Why are we here? What is the purpose of our existence? The answers change in each generation, but the questions are eternal.” So concluded Newsweek’s cover story.

Where humans *look* for answers may indeed change from one generation to the next, but the true answers—God’s answers—to those and other spiritual questions do not change. “The word of our God stands forever,” writes the prophet Isaiah (Is. 40:8). The apostle Peter repeats Isaiah’s confession (1 Pet. 2:25). Peter adds: “And this is the word that was preached to you.”

THE AUGSBURG CONFESSION

A Confession of Faith Presented in Augsburg by certain Princes and Cities to His Imperial Majesty Charles V in the Year 1530

Ps. 119:46

“I will also speak of thy testimonies before kings, and shall not be put to shame.”

Preface

Most serene, most mighty, invincible Emperor, most gracious Lord:

A short time ago Your Imperial Majesty graciously summoned a diet of the empire to convene here in Augsburg. In the summons Your Majesty indicated an earnest desire to deliberate concerning matters pertaining to the Turk, that traditional foe of ours and of the Christian religion, and how with continuing help he might effectively be resisted. The desire was also expressed for deliberation on what might be done about the dissension concerning our holy faith and the Christian religion, and to this end it was proposed to employ all diligence amicably and charitably to hear, understand, and weigh the judgments, opinions, and beliefs of the several parties among us to unite the same in agreement on one Christian truth, to put aside whatever may not have been rightly interpreted or treated by either side, to have all of us embrace and adhere to a single, true religion and live together in unity and in one fellowship and church, even as we are all enlisted under one Christ. Inasmuch as we, the undersigned elector and princes and our associates, have been summoned for these purposes, together with other electors, princes, and estates, we have complied with the command and can say without boasting that we were among the first to arrive.

In connection with the matter pertaining to the faith and in conformity with the imperial summons, Your Imperial Majesty also graciously and earnestly requested that each of the electors, princes, and estates should commit to writing and present, in German and Latin, his judgments, opinions, and beliefs with reference to the said errors, dissensions, and abuses. Accordingly, after due deliberation and counsel, it was decided last Wednesday that, in keeping with Your Majesty's wish, we should present our case in German and Latin today (Friday). Wherefore, in dutiful obedience to Your Imperial Majesty, we offer and present a confession of our pastors' and preachers' teaching and of our own faith, setting forth how and in what manner, on the basis of the Holy Scriptures, these things are preached, taught, communicated, and embraced in our lands, principalities, dominions, cities and territories.

If the other electors, princes, and estates also submit a similar written statement of their judgments and opinions, in Latin and German, we are prepared, in obedience to Your Imperial Majesty, our most gracious lord, to discuss with them and their associates, in so far as this can honorably be done, such practical and equitable ways as may

restore unity. Thus the matters at issue between us may be presented in writing on both sides, they may be discussed amicably and charitably, our differences may be reconciled, and we may be united in one, true religion, even as we are all under one Christ and should confess and contend for Christ. All of this is in accord with Your Imperial Majesty's aforementioned summons. That it may be done according to divine truth we invoke almighty God in deepest humility and implore him to bestow his grace to this end. Amen.

If, however, our lords, friends, and associates who represent the electors, princes, and estates of the other party do not comply with the procedure intended by Your Imperial Majesty's summons, if no amicable and charitable negotiations take place between us, and if no results are attained, nevertheless we on our part shall not omit doing anything, in so far as God and conscience allow, that may serve the cause of Christian unity. Of this Your Imperial Majesty, our aforementioned friends (the electors, princes, and estates), and every lover of the Christian religion who is concerned about these questions will be graciously and sufficiently assured from what follows in the confession which we and our associates submit.

In the past Your Imperial Majesty graciously gave assurance to the electors, princes, and estates of the empire, especially in a public instruction at the diet in Spires in 1526, that for reasons there stated Your Imperial Majesty was not disposed to render decisions in matters pertaining to our holy faith but would diligently urge it upon the pope to call a council. Again, by means of a written instruction at the last diet in Spires a year ago, the electors, princes, and estates of the empire were, among other things, informed and notified by Your Imperial Majesty's viceroy (His Royal Majesty of Hungary and Bohemia, etc.) and by Your Imperial Majesty's orator and appointed commissioners, that Your Imperial Majesty's viceroy, administrators, and councilors of the imperial government (together with the absent electors, princes, and representatives of the estates) who were assembled at the diet convened in Ratisbon had considered the proposal concerning a general council and acknowledged that it would be profitable to have such a council called. Since the relations between Your Imperial Majesty and the pope were improving and were progressing toward a good, Christian understanding, Your Imperial Majesty was sure that the pope would not refuse to call a general council, and so Your Imperial Majesty graciously offered to promote and bring about the calling of such a general council by the pope, along with Your Imperial Majesty, at the earliest opportunity and to allow no hindrance to be put in the way.

If the outcome should be such as we mentioned above, we offer in full obedience, even beyond what is required, to participate in such a general, free, and Christian council as the electors, princes, and estates have with the highest and best motives requested in all the diets of the

empire which have been held during Your Imperial Majesty's reign. We have at various times made our protestations and appeals concerning these most weighty matters, and have done so in legal form and procedure. To these we declare our continuing adherence, and we shall not be turned aside from our position by these or any following negotiations (unless the matters in dissension are finally heard, amicably weighed, charitably settled, and brought to Christian concord in accordance with Your Imperial Majesty's summons) as we herewith publicly witness and assert. This is our confession and that of our associates, and it is specifically stated, article by article, in what follows.

Articles of Faith and Doctrine (German)

1. [God]

1 We unanimously hold and teach, in accordance with the decree of the Council of Nicaea, 2 that there is one divine essence, which is called and which is truly God, and that there are three persons in this one divine essence, equal in power and alike eternal: God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. 3 All three are one divine essence, eternal, without division, without end, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness, one creator and preserver of all things visible and invisible. 4 The word "person" is to be understood as the Fathers employed the term in this connection, not as a part or a property of another but as that which exists of itself.

5 Therefore all the heresies which are contrary to this article are rejected. Among these are the heresy of the Manichaeans, who assert that there are two gods, one good and one evil; also that of the Valentinians, Arians, Eunomians, Mohammedans, and others like them; 6 also that of the Samosatenes, old and new, who hold that there is only one person and sophistically assert that the other two, the Word and the Holy Spirit, are not necessarily distinct persons but that the Word signifies a physical word or voice and that the Holy Spirit is a movement induced in creatures.

2. [Original Sin]

1 It is also taught among us that since the fall of Adam all men who are born according to the course of nature are conceived and born in sin. That is, all men are full of evil lust and inclinations from their mothers' wombs and are unable by nature to have true fear of God and true faith in God. 2 Moreover, this inborn sickness and hereditary sin is truly sin and condemns to the eternal wrath of God all those who are not born again through Baptism and the Holy Spirit.

3 Rejected in this connection are the Pelagians and others who deny that original sin is sin, for they hold that natural man is made righteous by his own powers, thus disparaging the sufferings and merit of Christ.

3. [The Son of God]

1 It is also taught among us that God the Son became man, born of the virgin Mary, 2 and that the two natures, divine and human, are so inseparably united in one person that there is one Christ, true God and true man, who was truly born, suffered, was crucified, died, 3 and was buried in order to be a sacrifice not only for original sin but also for all other sins and to propitiate God's wrath. 4 The same Christ also descended into hell, truly rose from the dead on the third day, ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of God, that he may eternally rule and have dominion over all creatures, that through the Holy Spirit he may sanctify, purify, strengthen, and comfort all who believe in him, 5 that he may bestow on them life and every grace and blessing, and that he may protect and defend them against the devil and against sin. 6 The same Lord Christ will return openly to judge the living and the dead, as stated in the Apostles' Creed.

4. [Justification]

1 It is also taught among us that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits, works, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith, 2 when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. 3 For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness, as Paul says in Romans 3:21-26 and 4:5.

5. [The Office of the Ministry]

1 To obtain such faith God instituted the office of the ministry, that is, provided the Gospel and the sacraments. 2 Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith, when and where he pleases, in those who hear the Gospel. 3 And the Gospel teaches that we have a gracious God, not by our own merits but by the merit of Christ, when we believe this.

4 Condemned are the Anabaptists and others who teach that the Holy Spirit comes to us through our own preparations, thoughts, and works without the external word of the Gospel.

6. [The New Obedience]

1 It is also taught among us that such faith should produce good fruits and good works and that we must do all such good works as God has commanded, but we should do them for God's sake and not place our trust in them as if thereby to merit favor before God. 2 For we receive forgiveness of sin and righteousness through faith in Christ, as Christ himself says, "So you also, when you have done all that is commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy servants'" (Luke 17:10). 3 The Fathers also teach thus, for Ambrose says, "It is ordained of God that whoever

believes in Christ shall be saved, and he shall have forgiveness of sins, not through works but through faith alone, without merit.”

7. [The Church]

1 It is also taught among us that one holy Christian church will be and remain forever. This is the assembly of all believers among who the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel. 2 For it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word. 3 It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that ceremonies, instituted by men, should be observed uniformly in all places. 4 It is as Paul says in Eph. 4:4, 5, “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism.”

8. [What the Church Is]

1 Again, although the Christian church, properly speaking, is nothing else than the assembly of all believers and saints, yet because in this life many false Christians, hypocrites, and even open sinners remain among the godly, the sacraments are efficacious even if the priests who administer them are wicked men, for as Christ himself indicated, “The Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat” (Matt. 23:2).

3 Accordingly the Donatists and all others who hold contrary views are condemned.

9. Baptism

1 It is taught among us that Baptism is necessary and that grace is offered through it. 2 Children, too, should be baptized, for in Baptism they are committed to God and become acceptable to him.

3 On this account the Anabaptists who teach that infant Baptism is not right are rejected.

10. The Holy Supper of Our Lord

1 It is taught among us that the true body and blood of Christ are really present in the Supper of our Lord under the form of bread and wine and are there distributed and received. 2 The contrary doctrine is therefore rejected.

11. Confession

1 It is taught among us that private absolution should be retained and not allowed to fall into disuse. However, in confession it is not necessary to enumerate all trespasses and sins, 2 for this is impossible. Ps. 19:12, “Who can discern his errors?”

THE ONE TRUE GOD AND HIS CREATION (ARTICLE 1)

David L. Mahsman

To find spiritual meaning, one must know God. Fortunately, He has told us about Himself and why we are here.

According to researcher George Barna, only seven of every 10 adult Americans today “adopt the traditional view of God.”

That’s not to say that even all those with the “traditional” view necessarily hold the Biblical view of God. The statement tested by Barna was, “God is the all-powerful, all-knowing, perfect creator of the universe who rules the world today.”

Honest seekers can come pretty close to agreeing with such a statement simply by looking around and drawing their own conclusions.

Nature, for example, tells us something about God.

The order in the universe—the regularity of day and night, the rhythm of the seasons, the balance of nature—and the intricate workings of the human mind and body offer strong proof that an intelligent and powerful mind is behind it all. There is even something “spiritual” about the awe we feel at the first sight of the Grand Canyon’s magnificence, the power of Niagara Falls, or the glorious beauty of fall color in New England.

The apostle Paul says as much when he writes that “since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made . . .” (Rom. 1:20).

We even carry within ourselves evidence of the divine. The human conscience, that innate knowledge of right and wrong, tells us that there is a God and that we are accountable to Him (Rom. 2:15).

God Tells Us about Himself

That there is a God who created and still sustains all things, and who is wise and powerful and good, is evident. But knowing a few things about the nature of God isn’t enough.

The fact is that we can know—actually *know*—precious little about the true God unless He reveals Himself to us. But here’s some good news: God *has* revealed Himself to us.

This revelation is found in Holy Scripture and in the person of Jesus Christ. “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe” (Heb. 1:1,2).

First of all, God tells us that He isn't a *what*, but a *who*. He tells us that He *is*. He calls Himself "I am" (Ex. 3:14), a name, by the way, that Jesus used in claiming Himself to be God: "I tell you the truth,' Jesus answered, 'before Abraham was born, I am!'"(John 8:58).

God tells us about His essential nature, that He is one God (Deut. 6:4; 1 Cor. 8:4), one indivisible essence, but in three distinct persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19; 2 Cor. 13:14). The Father is fully God (1 Cor. 8:6); the Son, who became a man in the person of Jesus, is fully God (1 John 5:20; Rom. 9:5); and the Holy Spirit is fully God (Acts 5:3,4).

Still, there are not three Gods, but one God. As Article 1 of the Augsburg Confession puts it, "All three are one divine essence, eternal, without division, without end, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness, one creator and preserver of all things visible and invisible."

Now, we could never have figured *that* out by ourselves. In fact, our minds aren't able to really comprehend the three-in-one nature of God even as God reveals it to us!

But this *is* how God reveals Himself to us, which makes any other concept of God a product of human imagination and nothing less than idolatrous. Thus, we must reject any other notion of God, whether it sounds vaguely Christian (such as those offered by the Unitarians, Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses) or not (as in other world religions or in the New Age Movement, for example).

God also tells us that He is eternal (Ps. 90:1,2); unchanging (Mal. 3:6); all-powerful (Luke 1:37); all-knowing (John 21:17); present everywhere (Jer. 23:24); holy and sinless (Lev. 19:2); entirely just, fair and impartial (Deut. 32:4); always faithful to His promises (2 Tim. 2:13); entirely good and kind (Ps. 145:9); merciful (Ps. 145:9); and gracious, loving and forgiving (Ex. 34:6,7; 1 John 4:8).

God's Creative Work

Let's look at what God has to say about how He made the world, the universe, everything—including you and me.

Using Moses as His human agent, God provides a completely reliable account of His creative activity. The only One who was actually present at the creation offers an overview of His own work in Gen. 1:1 to 2:3. Then, beginning with Gen. 2:4, He gives a more detailed account of the creation of man and woman, Adam and Eve, our first parents.

We learn there that we are not the product of chance evolution. We are not the descendants of some lower forms of life. That certainty is founded firmly on the truthfulness of God and His Word (although evolutionary models have problems even apart from contradicting the Creator's account). There is purpose to our existence, because we were deliberately created by a wise and loving God.

JUSTIFICATION: WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT (ARTICLE 4)

J. A. O. Preus III

God is our problem. He is also our Solution.

“What’s it all about?”

Sooner or later, any honest seeker into Christianity will ask this question. This is perhaps the most important question any pastor or lay person gets asked by those inquiring into the faith: “What’s it all about? What’s at the heart of this faith called ‘Christian’?”

Questions like these are on the minds of many people today, people who are seeking the inner meanings of life and existence, of God and humanity. “What’s it all about?”

It’s all about this: “. . . that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits, works, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ’s sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness, as Paul says in Romans 3:21–26 and 4:5” (AC 4).

Here is the heart of this faith called Christian. This is what it centers around, what it hangs upon. This is what makes it all make sense: We are declared to be right in God’s eyes, not because of our own works or merits, but solely because of God’s gracious favor towards us, on account of Christ, which we receive through faith alone.

The words “before God” should not escape our attention. What Christianity is “all about,” before it is about anything else, is addressing our deepest, most fundamental problem. The doctrine of justification addresses the “problem of God,” the “Problem that *is* God.”

The “God-Problem”

As sinners, our most pressing problem is the problem of the God who demands perfection, perfect righteousness. That we are not perfect, that we cannot live perfect lives, because of our sin, is a real problem—not for God of course, but for us, since God, who is perfectly just, is angry because of our sin and punishes it.

Justification is the solution to the “God-Problem.”

Christianity stands for a lot, indeed. It stands for personal and psychological wholeness. It stands for fairness and justice. It stands for

3. Read Romans 3:21–28. How is God’s righteousness made known to the world (v. 21)? How does it become ours (v. 28)? In what way is boasting “excluded” by faith (v. 27)?

4. How does the truth of justification “by grace, for Christ’s sake, through faith” answer the question “So what?” What does justification mean for your relationships? your work and priorities?

5. How would you respond to the statement, “If you want to be a Christian, you must give up . . . ?”

FOR FURTHER READING

- Romans 4:1–25
- Luther’s *Small Catechism*, The Third Article
- David Benke, *God’s Laws Don’t Have Loopholes* (CPH, 1995)

GOD'S WORK IN BAPTISM (ARTICLE 9)

Jerald C. Joersz

God baptizes us, giving us new birth and the hope of eternal life.

“When God speaks about a splinter,” Luther wrote, “His Word makes the splinter as important as the sun.”

The same can be said of the water of Holy Baptism. God reaches down into the ordinary, takes water and enwraps it with His Word of command and promise. Just as God entered human flesh in Jesus Christ, who “lived for a while among us” (John 1:14), so God takes simple water and through His Word becomes present in it.

Baptism “is not simply a natural water, but a divine heavenly, holy, and blessed water—praise it in any other terms you can—all by virtue of the Word, which is a heavenly, holy Word which no one can sufficiently extol, for it contains all the fullness of God,” is the way it’s put in the *Large Catechism* (LC 4, 17).

“A cow or a dog sees only water,” Luther once wrote, but “the pious see and appreciate the Word in the water.”

Thus, Baptism for Christians “is a treasure greater and nobler than heaven and earth,” the *Large Catechism* explains (LC 4, 10).

And why is Baptism such a noble thing? Because, as the Catechism says, it is *God’s* work: “To be baptized in God’s name is to be baptized not by men but by God himself” (LC 4, 10).

If this is all true, then why the seemingly lackadaisical attitude of some today toward Baptism? Not even the prodding of Grandma “to have it done” can move some to bring their children to Baptism!

And what about Christians for whom Baptism is rarely a point of reference, to say nothing of it being the daily source of strength and encouragement for a new life?

Could it be that lurking beneath present-day attitudes is what one theologian today has called “the offense of externality”—baptism looks so ordinary, how can it do such great things?

God Is at Work

Maybe a “poof” of smoke, a flash of light, a roll of the drum would for some remove the offense. But the truth is that in a quiet, unassuming way, God is at work through plain water to do a mighty thing.

CHRISTIANS AND GOVERNMENT (ARTICLE 16)

David R. Liefeld

It's not easy to keep church and state in a proper relationship. But it's not impossible, either.

From every conceivable direction, Christians today are bombarded with mixtures of church and state.

When socially conscious church bodies take liberal positions on federal and state legislation, for example, they often call them “Christian” positions. And, the New Christian Right often counters with conservative positions that they, too, call “Christian.”

Even more common is a simplistic withdrawal by many churches today into a purely “other-worldly” Christianity, with a wall of total separation between church and state. Many Americans seem to *want* their churches to be socially passive.

Are these our only viable options? Are we stuck with church bodies and coalitions of Christians aligned with political agendas, or must we settle for socially and politically passive Christianity?

The Lutheran Confessions offer yet another option—although it must be admitted that it often has not been implemented. The Lutheran Confessions envision such a careful distinction between Law and Gospel that the church is socially relevant—but without political partisanship.

When the Lutheran Confessions were written, church and state were profoundly mixed. In fact, for about a thousand years of the church's history to the time of the Reformation, the church exercised considerable political clout. And at the time of the Reformation, much of that clout was corrupted.

A New Church-State Relationship

Luther's reformation of the church sowed the seeds of a new relationship between church and state. While it did not require their separation (and in many Lutheran lands, the mixture of church and state continued unabated), it does have ample opportunity for growth in the American experiment of democratic pluralism.

Article 16 of the Augsburg Confession makes clear that civil government is good—contrary to those who had concluded that government was inherently corrupted and evil:

“It is taught among us that all government in the world and all established rule and laws were instituted and ordained by God for the sake of

good order, and that Christians may without sin occupy civil offices or serve as princes and judges, render decisions and pass sentence according to imperial and other existing laws, punish evildoers with the sword, engage in just wars, serve as soldiers, buy and sell, take required oaths, possess property, be married, etc.” This reflects Biblical teaching that the state is God’s servant (Rom. 13:1–7) and should be respected for the good it does (Matt. 22:15–22; Titus 3:1–2; 1 Peter 2:13–17).

In other words, the normal affairs of society are of rightful concern to Christians and should occupy their careful attention. It is not more spiritual or pious to ignore them by withdrawing totally into an other-worldly Christianity. In fact, full involvement with the nitty-gritty of politics by American Christians is helpful public witness to the moral law of the “nature’s God” to which the Declaration of Independence makes reference.

By the same token, according to Augsburg 16, it is not of the nature of true spirituality to bind the consciences of believers on social and political decisions, as if the Gospel was given for the reformation of society:

“Actually true perfection consists alone of proper fear of God and real faith in God, for the Gospel does not teach an outward and temporal but an inward and eternal mode of existence and righteousness of the heart. The Gospel does not overthrow civil authority, the state, and marriage but requires that all these be kept as true orders of God and that everyone, each according to his own calling, manifest Christian love and genuine good works in his station of life.”

Article 28 of the Augsburg Confession, on the power of bishops, clearly teaches the distinctive difference between the purpose and means of church and state.

“Our teachers assert,” says the Confession, “that according to the Gospel the power of keys . . . is a power and command of God to preach the Gospel, to forgive and retain sins, and to administer and distribute the sacraments.” And, “This power of keys or bishops is used and exercised only by teaching and preaching the Word of God and by administering the sacraments. . . .”

On the other hand, “Temporal authority is concerned with matters altogether different from the Gospel. Temporal power does not protect the soul, but with the sword and physical penalties it protects body and goods from the power of others.” Therefore, “the two authorities, the spiritual and the temporal, are not to be mingled or confused. . . . Hence, it [the spiritual power] should not invade the function of the other, should not set up and depose kings, should not annul temporal laws or undermine obedience to government, should not make or prescribe to the temporal power laws concerning spiritual matters.” (See John 18:36, Luke 12:14, 2 Cor. 10:4–5, Phil. 3:20, Col. 1:13–14, where the Church is described as a kingdom with spiritual, not temporal, power.)

“Two Kingdoms”

All of this is what has come to be known as the Lutheran doctrine of the “Two Kingdoms.” It means that careful distinction between Law and Gospel requires equally careful distinction between the Christian’s proper approach to church and state.

God remains Lord—Lord of the Two Kingdoms, Lord of both church and state. But the church exists to proclaim Christ. True spiritual righteousness is rooted in faith created by the Holy Spirit alone at work through the preaching of the Gospel. The state, on the other hand, exists for the sake of the social order. Civil righteousness is rooted in a morality of which all are capable. Civil righteousness is based on the natural law, which accuses evildoers and rewards those who serve the needs of their neighbors and community (see Rom. 13:3 and 1 Peter 2:14).

For Luther and the Augsburg Confession, the normative principles of the church are faith and love, while the normative principles of the state are reason and justice. Reason may not be appropriate to the righteousness of faith, but it is an essential part of government. Understanding this is critical to a proper understanding of church and state.

Reason and force are integral to government, but dare not be imported into the creation of true spirituality. People should not be forced to believe rightly, although government can and must force people to behave within the bounds of generally accepted morality. Government should not require people to be Christians, just as churches should not require Christians to be Republicans or Democrats, or to adopt politically partisan positions about which sincere Christians might reasonably disagree.

The Gospel does not legislate civil righteousness. It is not more spiritual or more pious to construct a so-called “Christian society.” Christians must express their faith in good works, but they can and will disagree about exactly how to do that. So also Christians can work vigorously on political agendas without expecting agreement among their brothers and sisters in the faith. Unfortunately, many churches today have crossed the line to endorse political agendas.

How, then, does the church remain socially relevant without binding the consciences of its members on social issues?

First of all, we need to acknowledge that some social issues, such as abortion, are so clearly addressed in God’s Word and (just as importantly) so central to the basic task of government that the church can speak to it with authority. Even here, however, prudence is required in distinguishing the Scriptural concern for the sanctity of life from the political means by which that might be accomplished, about which equally committed Christians might disagree. For, in each and every instance of social concern, the church must discern that speaking which will preserve its unity in the Gospel. This requires prudent sensitivity to the ease with which the church can become politicized.

Nevertheless, the church *can* help its members confront social issues without partisanship. This is best done in dialogue that provides opportunity for give and take between clergy and laity, rather than the strictly one-way communication characteristic of the sermon. Bible classes and congregational forums may be very helpful in this. The laity, with all its diverse gifts, has knowledge and expertise on technical subjects that church-body staff and pastors lack. The church must demonstrate respect for this expertise.

Thus, the church and its clergy should bring to bear the resources of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessional heritage in such a way that social awareness is increased through teaching about sin, the moral law and Christian citizenship. But this must be done with prudent sensitivity to basic political and philosophical differences that exist among Christians as they seek to implement their faith in good works of love. Equivalent, sincere concern for the poor and the oppressed, for instance, may well lead to quite different political convictions among equally committed Christians about how the government should address such an important concern.

Lutherans believe that there is a place for Biblical Law to guide Christians in their struggle to address social and political issues (see 1 Cor. 10:31 and Col. 3:17, where Christians are called to apply their Christian faith to *all* of life). Yet, we dare not confuse the complex and ambiguous task of applying our Christian faith to politics with the clear and ultimately decisive matter of knowing and believing the Gospel (Rom. 1:16 and 3:28).

FOR REFLECTION

1. What are some key issues in church and state relations today?

2. Why is it important to distinguish, in both doctrine and politics, between the two kingdoms—between God’s rule in the church and God’s rule/authority in the state?

3. Read Romans 13:1–7. Summarize, in your own words, a Christian attitude toward authority and law.

4. How might Christians respond to laws that are contrary to God's word and harmful to the Church?

5. Why must the church and church leaders be careful about their involvement in partisan political issues?

FOR FURTHER READING

- 1 Peter 2:13–25

lives. As fallen children, we cannot earn or merit God's love; we can only receive it as a gift. Through these simple, tangible ways, God demonstrates His love by giving us the full blessing of forgiveness, life and salvation.

2. As Luther notes, the blessings are that Baptism "works forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe. . ." It is God's will that all people come to a knowledge of salvation. Since Baptism is a means to bestow salvation, the church is called to baptize all people—infants, children and adults.

3. Absolution is sometimes called a sacrament, although it does not have a visible element such as water, wine, or bread. It is, however, a means of grace, that is, through absolution God conveys His gift of forgiveness, as the pastor speaks the Gospel of life to repentant believers. Answers may vary on the comfort of absolution, but likely revolve around the personal assurance of Christ in the words spoken by the pastor.

4. Christians receive the Lord's body and blood worthily by believing His promise, "Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins."

5. Answers may vary, but will focus upon the way that God gives us assurance of His every blessing through the means of grace. Christ reveals His presence among us, and He gives His strength that we may continue to serve Him in our daily lives.

The Ministry (Article 14)

1. Answers will vary, but may include higher expectations of pastors as effective communicators, leadership in the church and in the community, counseling skills, and other professional talents and capabilities. Some points of conflict between pastors and congregations may be the specific directions of the ministry, traditions, finances, membership needs and problems, educational programs, worship, even personalities.

2. Pastors preach, absolve, and administer the sacraments in the church publicly as called and ordained ministers of the Gospel. The office of the public ministry is instituted by God, but God gives the Church, in particular, the local congregation, the right and duty to call qualified men for the pastoral ministry. To paraphrase Walther, the congregation possesses the keys, that is, the preaching and administration of the sacraments, but the pastor uses the keys publicly on behalf of the congregation.

3. The work (ministry) of the pastor is rooted in the ministry of the Chief Shepherd (or "Good Shepherd;" see John 10). It is a willing ministry, self-sacrificial, demonstrating deep concern for the flock. Pastors serve the Good Shepherd by serving His people; they act in His stead and by His instruction. They oversee the church not as lords—for there is only one Lord—but as servants. They act with His authority, and motivated by His example, strength and compassion.

4. Answers will vary, but will likely focus on the Gospel ministry that Pastor and members together carry out in their congregation and community. When both see themselves in a partnership, united in faith and trusting in God's promises, the work of the kingdom moves forward under the Lord's blessing.

5. Christians can support their pastor(s) by prayers, regular tithes and offerings, words of encouragement, and many other expressions of gratitude and partnership for the ministry of the Gospel in their midst.

A Place for Tradition (Article 15)

1. Tradition enriches congregational worship and life. It brings a sense of stability, identity, structure, a connection to God's people of different times and places, and continuity in the ways of Christian faith and life. Some traditions become a burden to the church, immobilizing a congregational ministry and draining people of their vitality and creativity.

2. Some human traditions mentioned in the Augsburg Confession include vows for religious orders, the observance of special days for fasting and rituals, and festival celebrations. At times, Christians impose human rules on themselves and others when they insist upon teachings and practices as binding that 1) are not clearly taught in the Scriptures, and 2) are not consistent with the freedom of the Gospel (e.g., specifying a certain type of congregational organization as "required").

3. Jesus' criticism of the religious leaders is that they elevate human traditions over God's revealed Word in Scripture. As a specific example, Jesus condemns any human teaching or practice that violates the intent of God's will revealed in His law (e.g., the Fourth Commandment). Human traditions can "nullify" God's Word when they presume to speak for God—when God has not spoken—and especially when they contradict the Gospel of full forgiveness and salvation in Christ.

4. Some details of Christian ministry may be adapted to local circumstances (e.g., languages, facilities, patterns of organization, schedules, etc.), as long as these do not disagree with or diminish God's Word and the truth of the Gospel. Nothing can ever be adapted if the integrity of the Gospel of Christ is challenged.

5. Answers will vary, but may focus upon worship, outreach ministry, or other Gospel-focused fellowship. Tradition often leads God's people into a deeper understanding of and appreciation for His Word.

Church and State (Article 16)

1. Some key issues include the right to speak out against abortion, homosexuality, or gambling; Christian Bible study groups meeting on the campuses of secular universities; prayer in public schools at graduation

services and sporting events; vouchers that allow parents to designate a portion of their taxes to pay for their children's tuition at a private school; clergy involvement in political issues; government prosecutors who bring charges of child neglect against parents for their refusal of medical treatment. These and many other issues are relevant in American society today.

2. The distinction is important because God uses different means to accomplish His will in the church and in the world. In the spiritual realm God's will is accomplished through the Word and the Sacraments. In the secular realm God's will is accomplished through reason and force. The Church must never resort to or rely upon reason and force to proclaim the kingdom of God.

3. Government is a tremendous blessing from God. He has instituted governments to keep evil in check so that there could be peace on earth. Therefore it is important to obey the government because it is God's instrument. The same principle holds true for all authority, parents, police officers, school teachers or employers. A nation that has no respect for authority is headed toward anarchy.

4. As important as authority is, Christians must remember that it is not wrong question authority. It is only God and His will, as it is revealed to us in the Holy Scriptures, that we accept unconditionally. All other authorities derive the legitimacy of their rule from God. The moment an authority requires us to do something that is contrary to God's will, it loses the legitimacy of its authority, and it must be disobeyed.

5. The church and its leaders must be careful about involvement in partisan politics because 1) it is not our first calling; 2) it is not our area of expertise; and 3) sincere and dedicated Christians can be divided on many political issues. The Bible does not speak directly to many modern partisan issues. The church must always speak with certainty of God's Word.

The Return of Christ (Article 17)

1. Many people today reject the possibility and simply assume that the world will continue forever. This is especially true for those who have accepted a cyclical view of history and the New Age teaching of reincarnation.

2. Many people today refuse to believe that Hell exists. For some Hell is just another way of referring to our present trials, disappointments, and sufferings. The notion of God's final judgment is easily rejected by those who reject the existence of God (who would judge), and by those who reject the existence of any moral absolutes (standards by which He would judge). It would also be rejected by those who have the unbiblical notion that God is nothing more than a gentle, sweet, grandfatherly type, who would surely not hurt any one.

3. What a great comfort it is to know, when we are separated from a loved one by death, that such a separation is only for a short time. A glorious reunion will one day take place, when we will be reunited with all the saints who have gone on to heaven before us. There before the throne of glory we will see our parents, and grandparents as well the saints of old. What great courage is ours in knowing that our greatest enemies sin, Satan, and death will not have the last word, but because of Christ, and the victory He won on our behalf, we are victorious! This victory remains ours forever, and no one can take it away from us.

4. Millennialism is the false belief that Christ's kingdom is "of this world" (contrary to His own words to Pilate; John 18:36). The attempt to make Jesus an earthly ruler is not new; He confronted this attitude after the feeding of the 5,000 (see John 6:15). Millennialism contradicts and threatens the Gospel because it fails to grasp the full meaning of Christ's work in its broadest, most profound sense—the salvation of sinners and the promise of life eternal in heaven.

5. Answers may vary, but the promise of Christ's return affects every aspect of the believer's life. As Christians await Jesus' return they will want to use relationships, work, priorities, and their stewardship that others might be drawn to Christ, know the love of God, and escape eternal condemnation.

Free Will (Article 18)

1. We enjoy many freedoms in our country today. The Bill of Rights guarantees such freedoms as the freedom to speak what we believe, to gather with those we choose, to bear arms, and to worship where we please. These freedoms are fundamental to our way of life in the United States today.

2. We have free will in other areas of life so it seems logical to many that we should have free will in spiritual matters as well.

3. Apart from God's grace we followed the ways of the world, we were dead in our transgressions, and objects of God's wrath. In God's grace everything has changed. We are forgiven. We now have strength to follow Christ. We have new life that lasts forever. We are constant recipients of God's gracious blessings.

4. The first part of the statement is correct. Christ has saved us by His death and resurrection. However, the second part of the statement is incorrect. It is *not* up to us to choose to believe in Him. (It's actually a good thing that it is not up to us; because of our sinful nature we would certainly reject faith and discipleship.) God's word is clear: We did not choose Him; our Savior God has chosen us. "For he chose us in Him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight" (Ephesians 1:4).