

The Flacian Controversy on Original Sin

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[This essay was written for *No Other Gospel*, the Book of Concord anniversary book published by the WELS in 1980.]

Of the doctrinal controversies of the sixteenth century which were resolved by the Formula of Concord in 1577 the controversy on original sin is the first with which this Confession dealt. It was precipitated largely by one man, Matthias Flacius Illyricus, whose name has ever since been used to designate this controversy as the Flacian controversy. To understand the issues involved in this controversy it is necessary to know the theological training and doctrinal stance of Flacius, his literary accomplishments, his zeal for the pure doctrine of Scripture on a variety of subjects, and his personal characteristics, not the least of which was a stubborn contentiousness, not to mention his rather hectic and colorful personal life.

Biographers have evaluated Flacius variously as a staunch defender of Scriptural truth, as a vigorous and sometimes inept and incautious debater, as a stubborn defender of his own often ill-chosen words and terminology, as an arch-heretic and danger to the church, and as a profound theologian and sincere defender of Luther's Scriptural teachings, depending upon whose description of this highly gifted and prolific man one reads.

Matthias Flacius Illyricus—A Brief Biography

Who was this controversial figure in Reformation history? Matthias Flacius Illyricus (Frankowich Vladich) was born in Illyria on March 3, 1520, the son of a scholarly father, Andreas, who died while Matthias was still a youth. Young Flacius sought to satisfy his thirst for knowledge by studying successively at the feet of Franciscus Ascerius of Milan, and later under John Baptista Egnatius in Venice. At the age of seventeen he decided to study theology and applied for admission to a Franciscan monastery, but was persuaded by Baldus Lupatinus, the provincial of the monastery, to go to Germany to study theology. At Basel in Switzerland he studied theology under Simon Grynaeus in 1539, but in the same year went to Tuebingen, where a fellow-country-man by the name of Garbitius befriended him. From here he went to Regensburg in 1541 and eventually to Wittenberg, where he studied Greek and Hebrew under Luther, Melancthon, and Winshemius. Here he was assailed by serious doubts, which he disclosed first to Bugenhagen and later to Luther. As a result of this period of stress he became firmly grounded in the doctrine of justification by grace, earned a master's degree, and became professor of Hebrew in 1544. During the Smalcald War he taught at Braunschweig, where he enjoyed great popularity. In the fall of 1547 he returned to Wittenberg, but as a result of the Leipzig Interim soon became involved in controversy with his former friend and benefactor Melancthon over the doctrine of indifferent matters (the Adiaphoristic Controversy). Like the theologians of lower Saxony, he was not willing to concede anything to the papists, and soon accompanied his friend Nicolas Gallus of Regensburg to Magdeburg. Here he worked for a time as proofreader in a print shop and wrote several treatises against the Interim and the Adiaphorists. He also attacked Osiander's doctrine of justification and the subjectivism of Schwenkfeld, staunchly defending the proper use of the means of grace. He also attacked George Major on his attitude toward the necessity of good works for salvation. In these years his profound interest in doctrinal controversy became apparent.

The greatest accomplishment of Flacius in the literary field is doubtless his "Magdeburg Centuries," a comprehensive survey of church history by centuries, which he planned in Magdeburg and completed years later. The first three centuries were published in 1557 and the entire series was completed in 1574. He also produced a *Catalogus Testium Veritatis* in poetic form describing the doctrinal corruption of the church. His other greater work was the *Clavis Scripturae Sacrae* which appeared in 1567, a Bible dictionary in which theological terms are arranged alphabetically and are thoroughly defined and researched much in the style of

later Bible dictionaries such as Cremer or Kittel. He also wrote at length on the subject of original sin during the controversy over this doctrine in which he was personally deeply involved. These writings will be discussed subsequently in connection with the description of the controversy on original sin.

The Source of the Controversy

Flacius became involved in the controversy over original sin as a direct result of his previous involvement in the Adiaphoristic and Synergistic controversies. In 1548 Melanchthon had drawn up the Leipzig Interim, in which the Lutherans offered to reintroduce Roman Catholic ceremonies and to acknowledge the authority of the Pope and the bishops, if they would tolerate the true doctrine. However, the Leipzig Interim indirectly admitted the Semi-Pelagian teaching regarding original sin and the freedom of the will and made no mention at all of other doctrines which were in controversy. Melanchthon was regarded by many as a betrayer of true Lutheranism in promoting and securing the adoption of the Leipzig Interim.

Foremost among the opponents of the Interimists were John Hermann, Aquila, Nicholas Amsdorf, John Wigand, Alberus, Gallus, Matthias Judex, Westphal, and especially Matthias Flacius Illyricus. It has been said that it was due to Flacius more than to any other individual that true Lutheranism and with it the Lutheran church was saved from annihilation as a result of the Augsburg and Leipzig Interims.

From 1548 to 1555 the Wittenberg and Leipzig theologians Melanchthon, Eber, Pfeffinger, and others defended the Leipzig Interim and the reintroduction of Romish ceremonies into the Lutheran church. They were opposed by Flacius, Wigand, Gallus, and others. The issue in this controversy was: May Lutherans, under conditions such as prevailed during the Interim, when the Romanists on pain of persecution and violence demanded the reinstatement of abolished papal ceremonies, even if the ceremonies in question be truly indifferent in themselves, submit with a good conscience, that is to say, without denying the truth and Christian liberty, without sanctioning the errors of Romanism, and without giving offense either to the enemies or to the friends of the Lutheran church, especially its weak members?¹ The Interimists affirmed this, their opponents including Flacius denied it. The Adiaphorists contended that ceremonies which God had neither commanded nor prohibited are adiaphora (indifferent matters) and, other things being equal, may be observed or omitted, adopted or rejected. However, under circumstances testing one's faith they may become matters of principle and conscience. Flacius contended that under the prevailing circumstances any concession to the Romanists, even in ceremonies which in themselves were harmless, was tantamount to a denial of Lutheranism. He summarized the entire argument of the Anti-Adiaphorists in the axiom: "*Nihil est adiaphoron in casu confessionis et scandali.*"

In the Synergistic Controversy, 1555–1560, Melanchthon and with him Pfeffinger, Eber, Major, Crell, Pezel, Strigel, and Stoessel held that man by his own natural powers cooperates in his conversion. The loyal Lutherans, Amsdorf, Flacius, Hesshusius, Wigand, Gallus, Musaeus, and Judex, adhered faithfully to Luther's doctrine of conversion and salvation by grace alone in their opposition to the Synergists. Flacius formulated their position thus: "*Solus Deus convertit hominem....Non excludit voluntatem, sed omnem efficaciam et operationem eius.* God alone converts man....He does not exclude the will, but all efficaciousness and operation of the same." In 1559 Valentin Strigel, professor at Jena, and Huegel, his pastor, espoused the cause of the Philippists, opposed Flacius, and refused to endorse the so-called *Book of Confutation* which Flacius had caused to be drafted against the Wittenberg Philippists and Synergists. What complicated the situation was that Valentin Strigel formerly had always sided with the opponents of the Philippists. Even before the *Book of Confutation* was adopted, Strigel had been polemicizing against Flacius, but now he began to denounce Flacius at every opportunity as the "architect of a new theology" and "enemy of the Augsburg Confession." Flacius reciprocated by charging Strigel with scheming to establish a Philippistic party in Ducal Saxony. The situation erupted when Pastor Huegel refused to read and explain the *Book of Confutation* from the pulpit, and Strigel presented his objections to the Duke. On March 27, 1559, both were suddenly arrested at two o'clock in the

¹ F. Bente, *Historical Introductions to the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, (St. Louis; 1965), p. 108.

morning and imprisoned. Flacius was blamed as the instigator of this act of violence, but maintained that it had been done without his knowledge or consent. In September 1559 Strigel and Huegel were released after making some doctrinal concessions and promising not to enter into any disputation on the *Confutation*.

The Weimar Disputation

However, in order to settle the differences, Flacius and his colleagues Wigand, Judex, and Musaeus, as well as Strigel, asked for a public disputation, which Duke John Frederick was very willing to arrange because dissatisfaction with his drastic procedure against Strigel and Huegel had spread beyond the boundaries of his dukedom. A disputation was accordingly arranged at Weimar August 2–8, 1560. The purpose of the disputation was to discuss the part that man's free will does or does not play in conversion. In this context it was inevitable that the doctrine of original sin, which has corrupted the will of man, would play an important role. Thus it happened that in the Weimar disputation Flacius made statements on the subject of original sin which in subsequent years precipitated a serious controversy, which was to continue to disturb the Lutheran church for the next fifteen years.

The Weimar Disputation continued through thirteen sessions in those seven days. It concerned itself with the question whether man by his innate powers can and does cooperate in his conversion. Strigel maintained that the free will of man, though corrupted by original sin, nevertheless is not so seriously weakened as to become totally inoperative. He insisted that man's free will functions in conversion. Flacius maintained that original sin has so corrupted the free will of man that it functions only in matters of this world, but that man has no free will whatsoever in spiritual matters such as conversion.

In the first session of the disputation Flacius stated, "By resorting to a comparison you want to use a shortcut to show that man's nature is not removed but weakened and injured; I say, however, I am talking about spiritual matters, where certainly man is totally dead to good and is born and alive only to evil."²

Strigel maintained that he had never attributed the beginning of conversion to man's innate powers, but that it is wrought by God, that is, by the Holy Spirit, or by the Son of God, through the Word.³ The discussion led quite naturally to the consideration of original sin. Strigel stated that "original sin means disorder, that is, the removal of all powers of man, but never means the destruction or annihilation, that is, the total or universal perishing of the substance of man or of his properties which distinguish man from the animals and from all other creatures."⁴ He went on to say that "it is one thing to say that the free will is depraved and corrupted, and another to say that it is altogether removed, extinguished, fundamentally destroyed and rooted out."⁵ Strigel summed up his argument by saying, "I detract nothing from original sin, I do not minimize this horrible evil, by which the human nature has been depraved and corrupted, but I distinguish this evil or privation from the substance and from the property which cannot be removed unless we want to convert man into a statue which cannot be done without affecting his essence; and I do not say that this property is effective without the operation of the Holy Spirit's effective operation."⁶ Strigel went on to say that man after the fall into sin retained his intellect and his will. "Of these properties I speak. I have never exaggerated or glorified human powers, but I do not want man transformed into a statue or a mere torso. I make a distinction between substance (*substantia*) and quality (*accidens*), and that is not a sophistical or fabricated distinction. All educated men in this assembly and elsewhere understand it."⁷

In the second session after lunch on the first day Strigel acknowledged that original sin is a perversion, and added that it is not a slight, but a great, a sad perversion that should be deplored with all one's heart and that cannot be sufficiently explained by anyone's eloquence, nor properly lamented with any effusion of tears

² Matthias Flacius Illyricus, *Disputatio de originali peccato et libero arbitrio 1563*, p. 19.

³ *op. cit.* pp. 19–20.

⁴ *ibid.* pp 20–21.

⁵ *ibid.* p 22.

⁶ *ibid.* p 24.

⁷ *ibid.* p 25.

because of its magnitude. Free will he called the very substance of the intellect and of the will combined with a quality which cannot be separated from the substance and from natural reason. He maintained that “it is one thing to speak of original sin, which is a quality (*accidens*), and another to speak of free will, which all better educated men define as the intellect together with the will, preserved from any property or mode of operation.”⁸ To this Flacius replied categorically, “Original sin is not a quality (*accidens*). Scripture calls it the old man, the flesh, the work of the law written in their hearts (Ro 2:15), a foolish heart, an evil heart, not a quality in the heart.”⁹ In his reply Strigel defined original sin thus: “Original sin is a loss or corruption in all powers and faculties in man, but particularly in these three: in the mind, in the will, and in the heart.”¹⁰ He then concluded, “Original sin is not a substance nor anything substantial, nor a quantity, but a quality.”¹¹

After further discussion Strigel asked Flacius point-blank, “Do you deny that original sin is a quality (*accidens*)?”¹² To this direct question Flacius replied, “Luther clearly denies that it is a quality (*accidens*).” Then he went on to say, “Scripture testifies that man in his intellect is not only dead, killed and removed as regards divine things, but is also transformed into the image of Satan, dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh (Col. 2:13). There Paul speaks of the inherent evil or the loss of good powers. Thus it happens that the will is taken captive by the devil (2 Tm 2:26). Just as a Christian captured by a Turk is not free, but is forced to do what his master wills and commands, so Satan effectually holds the hearts of his victims captive and leads them about like a bull by the nose as he wills.”¹³ Strigel replied, “You mix many things together and cover none thoroughly. It is one thing to speak of substance, quite another to speak of a quality (*accidens*). Do you want to deny that sin is a quality?” To this Flacius answered, “I have said that Scripture and Luther affirm that it is a substance (*substantia*), and this is contrary to what you have said. A dead nature is not efficacious. Man is dead. Ergo.”¹⁴

In subsequent sessions of the disputation the subject of original sin was discussed repeatedly. On the second day, in the third session, Flacius said, “The words *regeneration*, *mortification*, and *renewal* so often emphasized in Scripture are valid. These are not names of a quality but of a substance, which is dead. But if we need to be reborn, then the substance has perished. Both the old and the new man are strong. As all those words clearly prove and show, original sin is not a quality which can either be present or absent, but our very substance, which has been reduced from the very best to the worst and which is as it were corrupted with a satanic corruption. Thus you see that Luther, Scripture, and even Victorinus (Strigel) himself affirm that original sin is not some quality, as he now reduces it to, which reduction is the source of many errors, but is the essence of man perverted into the image of Satan, and is a leprosy of the flesh, or a stony heart.”¹⁵ Strigel retorted that in the four years he had spent at Wittenberg he had never heard Luther or his colleagues either in their sermons or in their lectures say that original sin is the essence of man. He added that original righteousness was an ornament which man lost in the fall into sin. If it had not been a quality, it would not have been lost. “Therefore that original sin is merely a quality, not a substance I prove thus: because the essence of man could not be preserved after the fall, when the entire original righteousness of man had been lost. Besides, man could not live in eternal life if his substance were lost. But man will live after losing original sin. Therefore substance is one thing and quality another; original righteousness and sin are one thing and man himself is another. Likewise original sin is one thing and free will is another. These things are as well known to reason as light and darkness, so that it is not necessary to prove them with the testimony of Scripture.”¹⁶

Flacius told Strigel, “Your philosophical argument is this: Whatever can be present or absent while the subject remains is a quality; but original righteousness as the image of God and contrarily original corruption or

⁸ *ibid.* p 29.

⁹ *ibid.* p 29.

¹⁰ *ibid.* p 30.

¹¹ *ibid.* p 30.

¹² *ibid.* p 31.

¹³ *ibid.* p 32.

¹⁴ *ibid.* p 33.

¹⁵ *ibid.* p 50.

¹⁶ *ibid.* p 53.

sin or injustice can be present or absent while man remains, for man certainly remained after losing the image of God and will remain after he has lost original corruption in the life to come. Therefore the divine image or original righteousness and the image of Satan, original corruption, or sin, or injustice, are qualities. I answer: This sophism is frequently refuted clearly enough in Scripture. Yet it can also be refuted by philosophy and experience. For in order to deny your first or major premise, we shall see many things corrupted not only according to their quality, but also essentially, of which nevertheless a crasser or viler subject or essence remains, as we see wine substantially corrupted to vinegar, a sweet lump of dough into a fermented one, a sane temperament into a phlegmatic or melancholic one, a healthy body into a leprous one or one essentially corrupted or changed by syphilis. Water is corrupted, the air itself is corrupted essentially while it remains the same subject and is not utterly destroyed or changed into a different appearance from that which is corrupted.”¹⁷

Flacius argued further: “We often see the best wine, fluids, and ointments, precious perfumes, medicines, and even foods and similar things remain to some extent what they are as to their subject (*subjectum*), but nevertheless changed in such a manner that the best and greatest copper color and fiery substance (*substantia*) or vigor evaporates, and there remains only a mere earthy or watery substance. Indeed, also in old clothes and buildings there remains until their ultimate destruction some appearance of the original thing; and yet the best essence (*essentia*) has perished. The same can be said of all physical bodies. As therefore the crasser and baser and more visible substance (*substantia*) remains and yet the nobler vanishes, so in man also something remains, and yet that which was best in his reason and essence (*essentia*), namely the image of God, not only has vanished, but has been changed into the contrary, namely into the image of the devil. But what are this visible body and its powers and strength compared with that which was given to man in the beginning? But if such a great and simply dreadful change has been made in the body, what must we think has happened to the soul? What are our bodies also compared with those early ancestors who lived almost a thousand years, because God had reserved for them more of that primeval vigor for propagating and instructing the human race than for us. Often even Victorinus (Strigel) and Philip (Melanchthon) have called surviving man only the old rubbish, the ruins of the first building. I ask you, does this word or thing signify the change or transformation of mere qualities (*accidentium*)? Thus we see that this sophism can be clearly refuted also by experience itself and by philosophy, and not only by Scripture, which alone should be heard and followed here, in which we have besides other evident testimony concerning this matter, also clearly the testimony concerning the essential (*essentia*) transformation of this earthly and animal body into a spiritual and heavenly body in the resurrection. Thus your minor premise is also false, that man after the fall at least as to his essence (*essentia*) remained intact as he was, since rather only a miserable rubbish or mere cadaver or shadow of the first man has been left to survive for us. Since therefore both the major and the minor premise of your syllogism, or rather sophism, are false, certainly also your conclusion and your entire reasoning is void and false.”¹⁸ To this elaborate argument of Flacius his opponent replied curtly, “My adversary asserts that the image of God given to man in creation is the essence (*essentia*) of man.” To this Flacius replied, “I affirm that it is the essence of man.”¹⁹

The Point at Issue

The debate concerned itself chiefly with the ability of man to cooperate in his conversion. On the fourth day in the seventh session Flacius spoke of Paul’s conversion. He said to Strigel, “You ask me whence I can prove that the will of the Old Adam rages? I answer: That one sentence in Romans 7:23 is sufficient for me. Because even after his conversion the will of the Old Adam rages and roars against the Law of God and brings Paul into captivity to the law of sin. If therefore after conversion that Old Adam still rages and roars, when he is already rendered feebler and weaker, then he must rage much more before conversion.”²⁰ Strigel retorted, “In

¹⁷ *ibid.* p 54.

¹⁸ *ibid.* p 56.

¹⁹ *ibid.* p 57.

²⁰ *ibid.* p 137.

all of Scripture this phrase is nowhere found that conversion takes place by raging and roaring. Therefore I argue contrariwise: It is impossible that conversion takes place without consent; it is impossible to consent while raging; therefore it is impossible that conversion takes place by raging and roaring; that is, you are totally in error, as I am wont to say.”²¹

The chief point in contention in this debate was whether man can and does cooperate in his conversion by innate powers. Strigel maintained that this is the case, as we can see from a statement he made in the twelfth session on the last day of the debate. He said, “I state clearly, that in original sin I attribute a blindness concerning God to the intellect, which brings forth horrible and sad doubts concerning God and divine things. But this way of thinking does not eliminate a philosophical knowledge of God, which lies as a spark in the ashes.”²² Strigel believed that in unregenerate man there is still some knowledge of God, some ability on man’s part to apply himself to grace, some innate powers which have not totally perished, which by God’s grace can be fanned into flame and made to function, made to cooperate in man’s conversion. Flacius denied this and on the basis of Scripture pointed out that man is totally dead in sins, incapable of any act of the will that would contribute even in the least degree to his conversion. To emphasize the utter inability on man’s part to assist in his conversion Flacius argued that original sin has so totally corrupted man’s nature that the image of God is lost and he now has the image of Satan. This Flacius regards as a radical change from the pristine righteousness and holiness in which man was originally created, so that he has become what he was not before. Instead of a child of God he is now an enemy of God. To describe this change Flacius used terms like *essentia* and *substantia* to say that original sin has become the very essence and substance of man.

Strigel maintained that original sin is an attribute or quality in man. After man’s fall into sin man remained essentially and substantially the same human being consisting of body and soul as before, but his quality of righteousness and holiness has been replaced by the quality of sinfulness. This Strigel saw not as an essential or substantial change in man, but merely a change in man’s qualities and attributes. Taking this position, Strigel could now maintain that man’s innate powers were not totally removed but only seriously weakened, yet still capable of being roused to action, so that they can cooperate in the conversion of man.

Flacius made two serious mistakes in this debate. He failed to define carefully what he meant by such expressions as *subjectum*, *essentia*, and *substantia*, and he overstated his case to make a point. This antagonized his opponent Strigel to the effect that he insisted even more tenaciously that man can and does cooperate in his conversion. The debate ended without either party convincing the other. Not only did the Weimar Disputation not settle the synergistic controversy, but it actually precipitated another controversy on original sin. The statements that Flacius made regarding original sin had only one purpose. He was above all interested in combating Strigel’s contention that man has some innate powers with which he can cooperate in his conversion. For this reason Strigel maintained that man’s will was only weakened by original sin, seriously weakened, he was willing to admit, but only weakened, and could be stimulated to activity. In this way man would be able under proper conditions to cooperate with the Holy Spirit in coming to faith.

Flacius maintained on the basis of Scripture that man’s spiritual powers are completely destroyed by original sin, that he is dead in trespasses and sins (Eph 2:1), that he has lost the image of God, his concreated righteousness and holiness, and that he is now capable of only sinful thoughts, words, and deeds, and totally unable to exercise his will in a God-pleasing manner. Flacius was so deeply concerned with denying any spiritual powers in unregenerate man that instead of saying that man’s nature has been seriously corrupted by original sin, he went so far as to say that original sin had become man’s nature and essence (*substantia*, *essentia*). This was Flacius’ way of countering Strigel’s contention that original sin is only an attribute (*accidens*), and then minimizing the effect that original sin has had on man’s nature.

The basic issue between Strigel and Flacius was whether man after his fall into sin has any spiritual powers left with which he can cooperate in his conversion. Strigel maintained that this was so, Flacius denied it categorically. In the debate the subject of original sin was, of course, discussed thoroughly. Strigel was inclined to minimize its effect on man and declared that original sin is an attribute which does not affect or destroy the

²¹ *ibid.* p 137.

²² *ibid.* p 215.

substance, the nature or the essence of man. He maintained that after the fall man was still a rational human being consisting of body and soul, and that the the soul still has intellect, emotions, and will just as before the fall. Flacius emphasized the damage that the fall into sin and the loss of the divine image have done to man, depriving him of all spiritual powers, leaving him without fear of God, without trust in God, and with concupiscence. As a result he is now no longer capable of approaching God, cannot apply himself to salvation, or cooperate with God's Holy Spirit in his conversion, but is inclined only to evil. His will is now limited to that which opposes God and His holy will.

An Evaluation of the Weimar Disputation

Theologically Flacius was correct and Strigel in error. Strigel was a synergist, whose synergistic views are discarded and condemned in Article II of the Formula of Concord. Here the views of Flacius are vindicated and Strigel's error is exposed. However, in the Weimar debate Strigel, speaking of original sin, said not only that it is an attribute, which would be true, but added that it is only that kind of attribute of man which does not affect his nature so seriously as to deprive him of all spiritual powers. Here he went beyond Scripture which ascribes no spiritual powers whatsoever to unregenerate man. Flacius was so intent on making this point that he denied that original sin is an attribute which a man may or may not have and still remain a human being. He emphasized that original sin had done serious damage to man, seriously affecting his exercise of the will, limiting it to sinful wishes and intentions only, and thus bringing about the total corruption and eventual destruction of body and soul. This he conceived of as being a serious transformation in the very essence of man. The image of God had become the image of Satan. The child of God had become a lost and condemned sinner. Man who at creation was on familiar and friendly terms with God had become God's enemy (Ro 8:7). This Flacius saw as a complete change in man, converting him from what he had been into what he now was, and this he maintained seriously affected his very being, his nature and essence.

Had Flacius contented himself with saying that, he would have remained on Scriptural ground and would have remained an orthodox Lutheran theologian. But to emphasize this truth he resorted to exaggeration. Because of the serious effect of original sin on the nature of man, corrupting it totally, he called it the very nature of sinful man. Here he went too far. Man's nature was indeed seriously affected by sin, but was not changed into something it had not been before. It was still the same creature God had created, consisting of a material body and an immortal soul. The change that had been brought about by sin is that the material body had become mortal and that the immortal soul had become subject to eternal damnation. These are indeed serious changes in the condition, but not in the substance of man. The truth is that original sin is indeed an attribute, as Strigel maintained, but a much more serious and devastating attribute than he was ready to admit. To impress Strigel with the seriousness of original sin Flacius called it the very substance and essence of man. This unfortunate overstatement of his position on original sin exposed Flacius to serious criticism on the part of Strigel and his adherents.

Strigel was quick to see this opportunity and capitalize on it. He pointed out that if original sin is the nature of man and God had created man, then it follows that God had created a sinful nature. This makes God the source and origin of evil, a Manichaean error.

The friends of Flacius warned him of insisting on his statement that original sin is the very essence and nature of man and suggested that he modify and qualify his statement. This Flacius was reluctant to do. He had used the terms quality (*accidens*) and essence (*substantia*) in a sense somewhat different from that which is usually implied by these terms. The definition usually given for quality (*accidens*) is: Accident is something which does not exist as such nor is a part of the substance, but is changeable into something else.²³ Substance (*substantia*) is usually defined as: Substance is something which in reality has a being of its own and is not in another as having its being from the subject.²⁴ Had Flacius and Strigel agreed on a precise definition of these terms, they might have understood one another better and might not have argued past one another as they did.

²³ F. Bente, *op. cit.* p. 146. *Accidens est, quod non per sese subsistit, nec est pars substantiae, sed in alio est mutabiliter.*

²⁴ *ibid.* *Substantia est ens, quod revera proprium esse habet, nec est in alio, ut habens esse a subiecto.*

Flacius might have realized that original sin is not really a substance that exists by itself, but an attribute which man before the fall did not have, but after the fall did not only have, but was seriously corrupted by. Strigel might have realized that although original sin is an attribute, it is not one which has had little effect on the will of man, but one which has so thoroughly corrupted the will of man that he is now capable only of sinful thoughts and desires. Corruption is also an ambiguous term. In the usual definition of quality or attribute it is used in the sense of vitiating and spoiling the essence. It is possible to use the term for the total annihilation of the essence of something. The two debaters should have agreed on the definition of this term also. Flacius was using it in the latter sense, when he should have remained with the former. He should have pointed out that original sin indeed destroyed man's free will in spiritual matters, but that it did not destroy, but only seriously vitiated, his nature and essence.

The Controversy Continues and Intensifies

As the dispute continued in subsequent years, Flacius was not ready to modify what he had said. He clung tenaciously to his statement that original sin is the very essence and nature of man. True, he used various phraseology to express this idea. He distinguished between the material and the formal substance of man. The formal substance of man (*substantia formalis* or *forma substantialis*) was regarded by Flacius as the sinless condition of man as he was in creation. The material substance (*substantia materialis*) is the substance of man after the fall, his sinful nature. This he identified with original sin and then maintained that it became the formal substance of man. This was careless use of terminology at best and serious error at the worst.

Already during the Weimar Disputation his friends Johann Wigand and Simon Musaeus warned Flacius that his careless use of the word substance was exposing him to the accusation of propounding Manichaean errors and admonished him to refrain from using this terminology. Flacius maintained that he had been drawn into this controversy on original sin against his own will, ignored the well-meant advice of his friends, and continued to defend his previous statements.

In 1567 he published a tract which he had written several years earlier entitled *De Peccato Originalis aut Veteris Adami Appellationibus et Essentia*, which is added to his *Clavis Scripturae Sacrae* as a supplement. In this treatise he sets forth his doctrine of original sin in great detail. He emphasizes the enormous damage that original sin has done to mankind, depriving man of all spiritual powers and leaving his will capable only of sinful pursuits without any ability to cooperate in his conversion. In this treatise he says, "It is the opinion of all our churches, that the substance of man itself, especially the rational part, was not only in every way injured, wounded, and weakened in the first fall, but also utterly corrupted, depraved, and inverted, and transformed from the image of God into the image of Satan, as I have shown above and is also apparent from my regular sermons in the church. If therefore the substance itself is utterly changed and deprived of its good essence or the image of God, and is transformed into the opposite image, it clearly follows inevitably that that great evil produced and aroused in us by the devil is not only some quality in man, but is his inverted and transformed essence itself, of his new nature, just as if some excellent medicine were changed into deadly poison, where the poison would not be just some quality of that medicine, but the corrupted medicine itself. In the same manner it also follows that if original sin or that corruption is merely a quality, then the substance of man itself is not corrupted, but only the qualities in man; or only some little weakness or some harmful quality would have been added to man, while he remains in his original good essence. If the very substance of man itself is evil and corrupted and changed into some fierce beast and wild animal (as Luther and Bucer say), it follows then that original evil, that new monster produced by the devil through the fall of man is itself a substance, not just some quality that inheres in man. But I say that this evil was produced not by a creation out of nothing, or by some other proper reproduction, but by a transformation and transfiguration or inversion and perversion of the best formal substance of man into the worst."²⁵

²⁵ Matthias Flacius Illyricus, *Clavis Scripturae Sacrae* (Jena, 1674), *Tractatus*, col. 777–778.25

Simon Musaeus had seen this treatise before it was published and approved of its contents in general, but he suggested that the term “substance” be explained as meaning not the matter, but the form of the substance. After the treatise had been published, Musaeus wrote to Flacius on June 21, 1568, saying that he agreed with his presentation of original sin, but he expressed the fear that the bold statement which Flacius had retained that “Sin is a substance” would be dangerously misinterpreted.²⁶ It was the publication of this treatise that precipitated the theological controversy on original sin, in which Flacius was not only severely criticized for his extreme statements, but in which he also lost the support of many of his friends and associates and was regarded by many as a heretic.

A Literary War Ensues

In the years from 1568 to 1575 there was a flood of writings by Flacius and his opponents on the subject of original sin. The first opposition to Flacius came from Joachim Moerlin and Martin Chemnitz in Braunschweig, to whom Flacius had submitted his treatise on original sin for their approval. Chemnitz chided Flacius, “It would be sufficient and greatly to be desired that we could preserve in the church and transfer to our descendants what Luther has achieved and handed down to us. We should be willing to cease and desist from trying to improve on him. It is enough if we are able to retain what Luther has won (*parta tueri*): let us abandon all desires to go beyond (*ulterius quaerere*).”²⁷ Moerlin characterized Flacius thus: “Finally, in all his writings, even when he treats and defends sound doctrine, he diligently seeks to speak in novel and different terms and does not use the customary expressions (*usitata fundamenta*), but everything must be new and different, and often he includes in the title ‘hitherto explained by no one or by few.’”²⁸ Nikolaus Gallus (Hahn) in Regensburg, who offered asylum to the followers of Flacius when they were persecuted and who assisted him in writing his “Centuries,” urged Flacius to defend himself against these criticisms. This he did in gentle and calm language stating that it is true that he does not adopt the language and style of others except for some of the most basic and universally valid expressions such as *sola fide*. But he added that no author can pledge himself to express his thoughts in the words, phrases, and style of another. Yet he insists that he had no other objective than to set forth the truth of the matter in the clearest and most lucid form possible. Only in the title of this brief defense does he reveal a trace of irritation, He called it *Vera Excusatio M. F. Ill. contra novam quandam criminationem ab Adiaphoristis sparsam* (*A True Vindication of Matthias Flacius Illyricus Against a Certain New Attack Launched by the Adiaphorists*).²⁹

In a letter of August 10, 1568, Tilemann Hesshusius accused Flacius of teaching that Satan is the creator of substance. Flacius defended himself against this accusation by writing his *Γνώθι σεαυτόν* (*Know Thyself*) against the attacks of the Synergists and Philippists, particularly Christopher Lasius, who had written *Praelibationes Dogmatis Flaciani de Prodigiosa Hominis Conversione* (*A Foretaste of the Flacian Doctrine Concerning the Marvelous Conversion of Man*). In the same year Hesshusius prepared his *Analysis* with which Gallus and the Jena theologians agreed.

When he realized that all his former friends had deserted him, Flacius in January, 1570, published his *Demonstrations Concerning the Essence of the Image of God and the Devil*, in which he attacked his opponents without calling them by their names. In May of the same year Johann Wigand attacked Flacius by name in his *Propositions on Sin*. About the same time Moerlin published *Themata de Imagine Dei* (*Theses on the Image of God*) “against the impious and absurd proposition that sin is a substance,” and Chemnitz published his *Resolutio* against the proposition “that original sin is the very substance of man, and that the soul of man itself is original sin.” Hesshusius also published his *Letter to M. Flacius Illyricus in the Controversy Whether Original Sin is a Substance*, to which Flacius replied in his *Defense of the Sound Doctrine Concerning Original*

²⁶ Wilhelm Preger, *Matthias Flacius Illyricus und seine Zeit* (Erlangen, 1859–61), 2,327.

²⁷ *op. cit.* 2,328.

²⁸ *ibid.* 2,329.

²⁹ *ibid.* 2,332.

Righteousness and Unrighteousness, or Sin on September 1, 1570. In his *Analysis* Hesshusius repeated his charge that Flacius made the devil a creator of substance.

In his *Brief Confession* of September 28, 1570, Flacius offered to abstain from using the term “substance” in the manner in which he had been using it. Flacius and his friends now requested a colloquy on the basis of his *Confession*, but this was denied by the Jena theologians. Meanwhile Hesshusius on April 21, 1571, published his *True Counter-Report* to Flacius’ *Confession*. On the very first pages of this counter-report he repeats the accusation that Flacius makes the devil the creator of a substance (sin). This time he paid no attention to the remarks that Flacius had made in the Weimar Disputation, but cites evidence from his treatise in the *Claris Scripturae Sacrae*, a treatise in the conclusion of which Flacius disavows this accusation. Hesshusius gloats with self-satisfaction, “So I have proved six times from a single book that (Flacius) Illyricus says: “*Satan condidit, fabricavit, transformavit veterem hominem, Satan est figulus* (Satan has created, has made, has transformed the Old Man, Satan is a potter.)” Actually Hesshusius thereby betrays his own dishonesty, since he confuses creation out of nothing and Flacius’ statement that the divine image in man has been corrupted by original sin and converted into the opposite.³⁰

There followed a flood of publications by Andrew Schoppe, Wigand, Moerlin, Hesshusius, and Chemnitz, which made a peaceful settlement of the controversy utterly impossible. Flacius reacted to these writings by publishing on August 1, 1571, his *Orthodoxa Confessio M. F. Ill. de Originali Peccato, in qua simul adversariis sophismatibus et calumniis solide respondetur* (*The Orthodox Confession of Matthias Flacius Illyricus Concerning Original Sin, in which he replies thoroughly to all the sophisms and calumnies of his adversaries*). This turned out to be a rather large volume in which he declares again that both the image of God and the image of Satan are an essence, and the the opposite opinion really diminishes the merit of Christ. At the same time he complained that his statements were confused and misinterpreted by his opponents and that he was thus placed into the position of a man who asked questions concerning garlic and received answers regarding onions, that his opponents were not disputing with the statements of Flacius, but with their own imagination of what he was teaching.³¹

In the same year Wigand published a voluminous book entitled, *Of Original Sin*, in which he accused Flacius of teaching that original sin is the entire carnal substance of man according to both body and soul. In describing the Flacian doctrine he said, “Original sin is a substance, as they teach. Therefore original sin is an animal, indeed an intelligent animal. You must also add ears, eyes, mouth, nose, arms, belly, and feet. Original sin laughs, talks, sews, sows, works, reads, writes, preaches, baptizes, and administers the Lord’s Supper, etc. For the substance of man does such things. There you see where such men end up.”³² Flacius replied to this *reductio ad absurdum* in his *Christian and Reliable Answer to All Manner of Sophistries of the Pelagian Accident* in 1572, in which he protested that his teachings were being misrepresented. In the same year Wigand published *Reasons Why This Proposition, in Controversy with the Manicheans: “Original Sin Is the Corrupt Nature,” Cannot Stand*. In this treatise Wigand points out that “Evil of the substance and evil substance are not identical,”³³ a distinction that Flacius failed to make clearly.

Already in August of 1571 Hesshusius had published his *Clear and Perspicuous Testimony of Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, that Original Sin is Not a Substance or Nature, but an Evil Attribute*. In 1572 Flacius responded to this attack on *Concerning the Opinion of Augustine and the Manicheans in the Controversy over Sin*. In it he showed from Augustine’s writings that the Manicheans taught two eternal principles, one good, the other evil. According to them the evil substance has been mingled with the good substance of man, but this evil substance had previously had an existence of its own with its own substance. The Manicheans also said of actual sin that it is a substance. Then he disavowed all these Manichean teachings, saying, “I most solemnly condemn the Manichean insanity concerning two creators. I have always denied that original sin is something, or has ever been something, outside of man; I have never ascribed to this sin any

³⁰ *ibid.* 2,343–347.

³¹ *ibid.* 2,349–350.

³² *ibid.* 2,353.

³³ *ibid.* 2,410.

materiality of its own.”³⁴ Hesshusius replied to this defense of Flacius in the same year in his *Antidote (Antidoton) Against the Impious and Blasphemous Dogma of Matthias Flacius Illyricus by Which He Asserts that Original Sin Is a Substance*. In this book, which was republished in 1576 and again in 1579, Hesshusius maintained that “if original sin is the substance of the soul, then we are compelled to assert one of two things, namely, either that Satan is the creator of substances, or that God is the creator and preserver of sin.”³⁵ At this time Simon Musaeus joined the battle with his *Opinion Concerning Original Sin*, in which he taught that “original sin is not a substance, but the utmost corruption of it, in matter as well as form,” and that therefore “Pelagianism no less than Manichaeism is to be excluded and condemned.”

When the ministerium of Strassburg turned against Flacius, he again published several books defending his position on the controverted questions, which resulted in his expulsion from the city. In the spring of 1573 he published as his answer to the *Antidoton* of Hesshusius his *Solid Refutation of the Groundless Sophistries, Calumnies, and Figments, as also of the Most Corrupt Errors of the “Antidote” and of Other Neopelagian Writers*. In this treatise Flacius charged Hesshusius with misrepresenting his teachings and demanded that he swear whether he really believed to have found the alleged errors in his writings.

Adherents and Supporters of Flacius

In 1572 Count Vollrath invited Flacius and his adherents to his castle at Mansfeld for a colloquy with his adversaries. It was particularly Cyriacus Spangenberg who tried to bring about an understanding between the two groups of theologians by suggesting “*Teneat Illyricus mentem, mutet linguam*” (Let Flacius retain his opinion, but let him change his terminology). In the colloquy Flacius, Spangenberg, and his adherents were opposed by the Jena theologians including Jerome Menzel, Rhode, Fabricius, and others. When Fabricius declared that our nature is corrupt only in so far as it is not in conformity with the Law of God, Flacius exclaimed, “*Non quantum*, not in as far; but I say it is not in conformity *because* it is corrupt, *quia corrupta est*.”³⁶ Count Vollrath and his adviser, Caspar Pflug, gave Flacius a written testimony that he (Flacius) had not been convinced, but had been found to be correct in the controversy on original sin. Flacius published this testimony, and Count Vollrath published the minutes of the colloquy in 1573. This precipitated a number of further publications by Flacius, his friends, and their opponents. Flacius consistently adhered to his false terminology as well as teaching, apparently never doubting that he was only defending Luther’s doctrine. At Mansfeld the animosity against Flacius and his adherents did not subside, even after the death of Flacius in 1575. Some of them were punished with excommunication, some were thrown into prison, and even denied Christian burial. Spangenberg fled secretly from Mansfeld but continued to defend the doctrine of Flacius in a tract *Concerning Original Sin* which he published in 1586 under a pseudonym. He died without changing his views. Other adherents of Flacius had also died during the controversy. F. Coelestinus, a professor at Jena, was suspended and left the city, but participated in the controversy by publishing his *Colloquy between Himself and Tilemann Hesshusius*. He died in 1572. In August 1571 Court-preacher Christopher Irenaeus and Pastors Guenther and Reinecker were dismissed in Weimar because of their adherence to Flacius. Irenaeus published *Examen Libri Concordiae* and many other books in which he contends that original sin is a substance. Pastors Wolf in Kahle, Schneider in Altendorf, and Franke in Oberrosla were dismissed in 1572 for the same reason. At Lindau four preachers who identified themselves with Flacius were deposed. One of them, Tobias Rupp, held a public disputation with Andreae. Among the supporters of Flacius were his son, Matthias Flacius, and Caspar Heidelin. Saliger (Beatus) and Fredeland, who were deposed in Luebeck in 1568, also taught “that original sin is the very substance of man” and that Christ had assumed “the flesh of another species” than ours.³⁷

In Regensburg four adherents of Flacius were dismissed in 1574, among them Joshua Opitz (1543–1585). These and others had emigrated to the Archduchy of Austria, where the Lutherans were numerous and

³⁴ *ibid.* 2,355.

³⁵ Johann Gieseler, *Lehrbuch der Kirchengeschichte* (Bonn, 1835–57), Band 3, 2, 256.

³⁶ Wilhelm Preger, *op. cit.* 2,375.

³⁷ Johann Gieseler, *op. cit.* 3, 2, 275.

influential. No less than forty of the Lutheran ministers of Austria are said to have shared the views of Flacius.³⁸ Only a few of these showed symptoms of fanaticism, which resulted in their dismissal. Among them was Joachim Magdeburgius, an exile at Efferding. He taught “that the bodies of believing Christians after their death were still essential original sin, and that God’s wrath remained over them till the Day of Judgment.”³⁹ At the same time he branded as errorists other followers of Flacius such as Spangenberg, Opitz, and Irenaeus, who declared their dissent with him. In 1581 the Flacians in Austria issued a declaration against the Formula of Concord, charging that its teaching is inconsistent with Luther’s doctrine on original sin. There were numerous Flacianists in German Austria as late as 1604.

Flacius’ Doctrine of Original Sin

What Flacius really believed and taught concerning original sin is best seen in his treatise on the names and the essence of original sin or the Old Adam appended to his *Clavis Scripturae Sacrae* in the edition of 1674. Here he says, “We were formerly, in the first creation, something very good, both as to attributes (*accidentalibus*) and as to substance (*substantia*). Later we were changed essentially (*essentialiter*) into something very bad as to its substance (*substantia sua*), as when the best wine were changed into the sourest vinegar.”⁴⁰ Flacius is describing in these words the result of original sin, not original sin itself which produced that result. This is careless use of terminology.

Farther on in the same treatise he says, “This changed formal substance (*substantiam formalem*) or substantial form (*formam substantialem*) of the highest degree (which particularly gives man the essence of the thing which his Creator wanted him to be), which now makes him as the formal cause into the image and a son of the devil, and gives him that horrible essence of the Old Adam, I maintain, is the true and as it were the only source of all sin, be it habitual or actual, and this is the very thing we call original sin.”⁴¹ In this statement he equates substantial form and formal substance and calls original sin by both of these names. In his zeal to deny Strigel’s contention that original sin is a mere attribute which did not totally destroy man’s innate spiritual powers, he overstates his case and calls original sin a substance.

On the very next page he claims that Scripture in many places speaks thus of original sin: “For these substantial kinds (*substantialia genera*) of original sin are found everywhere in Scripture, and never just some attributes (*accidentalia*). Indeed, original sin, the root and source from which other sins spring, is a perverse heart, lacking understanding, blind, uncircumcised, stony and hard; it is the natural man, the Old Adam, the body of death, the body of sin; it is the carnal mind, it is flesh and blood, it is the thoughts of the heart, it is the vain mind, the darkened understanding, Ephesians 4:17,18; it is finally the image of Satan, or human reason itself, that most fierce beast and most hostile to God, as Luther has described it in vivid colors.... Since Scripture itself always speaks about original sin as of some substance, why am I being accused for using this name? Or why would anyone dare to object as if some novelty were being introduced into the heavenly doctrine by this opinion?”⁴² Again Flacius is confusing the effect of original sin on the human nature with the corrupted human nature itself.

A few pages farther on he says bluntly, “Original sin is, and is said to be, the very corruption of man. Corruption not only means a weakening or some injury, as some dream, but total perversion. After all, what is that corruption of man but the corrupted nature itself, particularly an evil mind and an evil heart? The word corruption there certainly does not mean something abstract, or an action, but the corrupted and perverted thing itself, which is hostile and opposed to God; indeed, an evil heart, an evil mind.”⁴³ Flacius uses the word

³⁸ Wilhelm Preger, *op. cit.* 2,393.

³⁹ Joecher, *Lexicon*, 3, 32.

⁴⁰ Matthias Flacius Illyricus, *op. cit.* col. 767.

⁴¹ *ibid.* col. 770.

⁴² *ibid.* col. 771.

⁴³ *ibid.* col. 775.

corruption in its most intense sense, not merely spoiled, but destroyed. Again he is using a term without adequately defining its scope.

Hence he concludes, “If Satan corrupted the substance, then also that which he produced through such corruption is a substance. But he brought forth nothing but sin. Therefore sin is a substance. But to them [the adversaries] it seems that the word corruption means only some minor injury or weakening, contrary to the best known and most commonly used and accepted meaning of the word. That is how it comes about that when they err in the use of words they also err in the matter itself.”⁴⁴

Once having committed himself to this line of thought Flacius vigorously defended it. A few pages farther on he says, “If that original pest or evil swamp is not the substance of man, but only some attribute (*accidens*) in man, then it follows that man’s actions are pure and holy. For they proceed from a very rational and passionate soul. All wise men say that these actions are the substance of man. It also follows that original sin is inactive, for these actions, as I have said, originate from a rational soul, which is a primary substance. It also follows that man himself is not evil of and by himself, but that only an evil attribute adheres to him, as if (as my adversary has dreamed) someone smeared a magnet with garlic juice. It also follows that it is not necessary for the old man to die, be cast off and buried, and that a new man be produced, brought forth and created, but only that evil attributes be eliminated, removed, changed and altered; and as it were that filth with which man is contaminated be removed from him by wiping and washing, which the sophists call cleansing the heart. But Luther, accusing them, says concerning Psalm 51 nothing of purging, but that a new heart must be created, just as the Holy Spirit says in many places in Scripture.”⁴⁵ Here Flacius points out the false conclusions that result from minimizing original sin as a mere attribute of man.

Flacius also defends himself against the unfair logical syllogisms built by his adversaries on his statements, as for example: “Every substance is from God. A certain sin is a substance. Therefore a certain sin is from God.” Flacius points out that in theology we do not operate with logical conclusions, especially when they contradict a clear word of Scripture, but content ourselves with quoting Scripture. He adds that for original sin in the above syllogism one might substitute the devil or the Old Adam and draw equally ridiculous conclusions.⁴⁶ Flacius goes on to say: “That sophism that God is the author of evil is easily refuted. Indeed, God Himself forms, reproduces, and preserves that stony heart and that Old Adam out of its own father, another Old Adam, thus bringing forth an evil substance from another evil substance, and (as Christ says) a generation of vipers from vipers, so he also preserves and sustains Satan himself just as he now is, since he is evil pure and simple. But for that reason He is not the author of evil or of the stony heart in the first place, but He only preserves that form of the Old Adam or tolerates those vessels of wrath with great patience, until he restores some and casts the rest into eternal fire.”⁴⁷

Evaluations of Flacius’ Position

Appended to this treatise is an evaluation of it by John Musaeus, the editor of the 1674 edition of the *Clavis Scripturae Sacrae*. In it he says that Flacius “does not treat of that original pestilence completely, for man, whatever he is in substance or in attributes, inasmuch as he is such, is purely abomination and sin, but that he treats of its most important substantial part, which Scripture declares and reproves most of all. Here he points out clearly (1) that the entire original pestilence comprises different parts, some substantial, others accidental, (2) that one of these substantial parts is more important than the others, (3) that the substantial parts are the very body and soul of man, and thus the entire man, as he is now and as he came from his mother’s womb, in substance; of which the latter, however, namely the rational soul, is the more important, indeed the most important part which Scripture declares and reproves most of all. (4) But the accidental parts he himself explains as the worst inclinations born with us, or the innate evil lust. Thus he says in column 771, line 6, ‘Nor

⁴⁴ *ibid.* col. 778.

⁴⁵ *ibid.* col. 780-781.

⁴⁶ *ibid.* col. 784.

⁴⁷ *ibid.* col. 787.

do I deny that some part of original sin is accidental. For I know that sin has so thoroughly pervaded man as well as the entire world, that it can be found in the entire man and in all his qualities, and it is something which is certainly characteristic. For the substance, the very flesh, the Old Adam, the stony heart, or the carnal mind are indeed one form of sin, the quality of the most evil inclinations which are innate in us, is another.”⁴⁸ Musaeus points out that Flacius did not deny that original sin is a quality, but that he considered it much more serious than a mere quality, which may or may not be present in man, as Strigel maintained.

Musaeus further states, “Certainly it is the belief of our churches that the statement that the substance of man itself, but particularly the rational part, is totally corrupt as a result of the fall of man, is true, if it is rightly understood. But one must know that the phrase, ‘the substance of man itself, but particularly the rational part, is corrupt’ can be understood two ways; first in a terminal way, that the very substance of man, particularly the rational part, is corrupted, this would be saying that the corruption has resulted in the substance of man itself, and particularly in the rational part of man, and destroys it. The other way is subjective, that the substance itself, indeed the rational part of man, is the subject of corruption. In the former sense the statement is false and is condemned by the unanimous consensus of all our churches. For we all recognize and defend the fact that the substance of man itself and its rational part are not terminally corrupted or destroyed and abolished, but remained in our first parents, and even now remain and are produced and preserved in all men by God. But in the latter sense all our churches agree that the substance of man itself and particularly the rational part has been seriously, deeply, and most thoroughly corrupted by the fall of man, so that all good powers to recognize and embrace spiritual truths are totally lost, while the substance nevertheless remains as the subject of the corruption. It seems that Flacius, deceived by the ambiguity of the phrases, mistook one for the other.... Having made this observation, the conclusions which Flacius drew from the aforesaid statement of our churches, which he misunderstood, fell away. The first of these is: If the substance itself is seriously changed and robbed of its good nature and the image of God, and transformed into the opposite image, it follows simply inevitably, that that monstrous evil produced and aroused in man by the devil is not just some quality (*accidens*) in man, but is his reversed and transformed essence itself and a new nature.... His second conclusion is: If original sin or that corruption is merely a quality (*accidens*), it follows that not the substance of man itself has been corrupted and made to be hostile to God, but only some qualities in man.... The third conclusion is: If the substance itself is evil and corrupt and changed into some fierce beast and wild animal (as Luther and Bucer say), it follows that the substance itself is that original evil, that new monster, produced by the devil through the apostasy of man, and not something else added to him or inhering in him.”⁴⁹

The most thorough biographer of Flacius, Wilhelm Preger, concludes “that Flacius has been misunderstood by his opponents. He never made the devil the creator of a new substance, but rather the corrupter of the good substance of man. He did not make God the creator of sin, but with Luther taught that God forms men out of the mass of humanity corrupted by the devil. He distinguished between the material and the form of the corrupted substance, and designated only the nobler, the moral form of the substance of the soul as original sin. Yet it must be pointed out that Flacius drew false conclusions from these views.”⁵⁰

Both Flacius and his opponents used terms such as essence, substance, substantial form, formal substance, accidents, qualities, without carefully defining the scope and content of these expressions. This caused them not only to misunderstand one another, but also to argue past one another. Add to this that each party to the dispute overstated his case in an attempt to persuade the adversary, and the bitterness and inconclusiveness of the controversy appear as a necessary consequence of such procedure.

Reinhold Seeberg in his evaluation of the Flacian controversy says, “Flacius was never a heretic. He only wanted to say that sin consists of the domination of man by a guiding principle that was originally foreign to him, which gives a different direction to man and transforms him thereby. It seemed to him that this

⁴⁸ *ibid.* col. 793.

⁴⁹ *ibid.* col. 816-817.

⁵⁰ Wilhelm Preger, *op. cit.* 2,409-410.

determining principle is better characterized by the concept of a substance or form than by the concept of a quality or accident.”⁵¹

What made the controversy more important than a mere difference of opinion regarding the proper word or term with which to designate original sin is the consequence that a proper understanding of original sin has for the doctrine of justification. The question here is whether man after his fall into sin has any innate spiritual powers by which he can cooperate in his conversion or contribute anything to the process of his coming to faith. Strigel and his adherents believed this to be the case, Flacius vociferously denied it. It was in defense of these two opposite positions on the doctrine of conversion and justification that the controversy over original sin was precipitated.

The Resolution of the Controversy by Article I of the Formula of Concord: Of Original Sin

This controversy was not really settled or decided by the flood of literature it produced on both sides of the question at issue. Only the first article of the Formula of Concord brought order out of the confusion of this controversy by rejecting both the synergistic as well as the Manichaeian aberrations in the doctrine of original sin.

In the Formula of Concord the point at issue (*status controversiae*) is set forth in Article I thus: “One side contended that, since the fall of Adam man’s nature and essence are entirely corrupt, the nature, substance, and essence of the corrupt man, now, since the Fall, or, at any rate, the principal, highest part of his essence, namely, the rational soul in its highest state of principal powers, is original sin itself, which has been called nature-sin or person-sin, for the reason that it is not a thought, word, or work, but the nature itself whence, as from a root, spring all other sins, and that on this account there is now, since the Fall, because the nature is corrupt through sin, no difference whatever between the nature and essence of man and original sin.

“But the other side taught, in opposition, that original sin is not properly the nature, substance, or essence of man, that is, man’s body and soul, which even now, since the Fall, are and remain the creation and creatures of God in us, but that it is something in the nature, body, and soul of man, and in all his powers, namely, a horrible, deep, inexpressible corruption of the same, so that man is destitute of the righteousness wherein he was originally created, and in spiritual things is dead to good and perverted to all evil; and that, because of this corruption and inborn sin, which inheres in the nature, all actual sins flow forth from the heart; and that hence a distinction must be maintained between the nature and essence of the corrupt man, or his body and soul, which are the creation and creatures of God in us even since the Fall, and original sin, which is a work of the devil, by which the nature has become corrupt.”⁵²

Article I of the Formula of Concord then sets forth the Lutheran doctrine of original sin: Not only actions, but also the natural corruption of man is sin, yet God is not the author of sin, but only of the nature of man which has become sinful. The extent of sin must be learned from Scripture, which teaches its universality, its depravity, and its evil lust and propensity, as well as its dire consequences. The remedy for sin is only the forgiveness of God for Christ’s sake.

In the antithetical part of the article the false doctrines of synergism and Pelagianism as well as Manichaeism are summarily rejected.

The third part of the article points out the need for making a clear distinction between the human nature itself and its corruption by original sin. The chief articles of our Christian faith, such as the doctrine of creation, of redemption, of sanctification, and of the resurrection, compel us to preserve this distinction.

In the concluding portion of the article terms and expressions used in the controversy over original sin, such as nature, substance, and *accidens*, are carefully defined.

In this manner the Formula of Concord established the Scriptural Lutheran doctrine on original sin, which has been taught and believed in the Lutheran Church now for four hundred years. The Lutheran Church

⁵¹ Reinhold Seeberg, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, (Leipzig, 1908–20), IV, 2, 495.

⁵² *Triglot Concordia, The Symbolical Books of the Ev. Lutheran Church*, Formula of Concord, Thorough Declaration, Article I, Of Original Sin, p. 859.

is one of the few churches of our time that still teaches as the Scriptures do on this important subject of original sin. Without a clear understanding of this doctrine other doctrines such as the doctrine of conversion, of justification, and of redemption are easily vitiated and misunderstood. In this anniversary year of the Formula of Concord we have great cause for gratitude to God for the preservation of the Scriptural doctrine of original sin among us.