

The Formula of Concord, Article II, Of the Free Will

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Introduction: A Digest of Bente's Historical Introduction, XIV, "The Synergistic Controversy," pages 124-143.

Bente opens his study with an examination of variations on a theme: Majorism, synergism, Pelagianism, Semi-Pelagianism, and all systems that attribute anything to the unregenerate will of man in conversion are violations of the *sola gratia* by which Scripture proclaims we are saved. To make man a concurring cause of conversion and salvation with God himself is to deprive the saints of the assurance that God is gracious and of the certainty of our salvation.

The Majorists, championed by Melancthon, asserted that "good works are necessary to salvation," that is, that the preservation of faith and salvation depend on right conduct after conversion. They reasoned that, since evil works destroy faith and justification, good works are required to preserve it.

Synergism, also championed by Melancthon, proposes that conversion and salvation depend partly on unregenerate man's conduct toward converting grace. Their Lutheran allegiance to the *sola fide* was nominal, because they understood faith to be a work of man. Bente notes that synergism is a more dangerous mutation of Majorism, because it minimizes man's cooperation in public statements, and employs ambiguous phrases to conceal its true nature. Rooted in Wittenberg, synergism sprang up mushroomlike after Luther's death, while the orthodox Lutheran theologians were battling to exterminate Adiaphorism and Majorism. Melancthon's true position on the capabilities of man's unregenerate will became progressively clearer as successive editions of his *Loci* hit the bookshelves. The controversy caught fire as the degree of Melancthon's departure from Luther's scriptural, Pauline, monergistic position became apparent.

Luther's position, (its motto: "faith alone justifies") confesses the total depravity of natural man, that man is spiritually dead, that man is at enmity with God, that man is unable to respond to God's call and grace by any power of his own ("purely passive"), and that conversion comes only by the gracious choice, decree, operation, and gift of God (Romans 8:28-30). Only in scriptural monergism is there any true comfort for the soul. Luther argued thus in his writing on the Penitential Psalms: "It is characteristic of God to make (create) something out of nothing. Hence God cannot make anything out of him who is not yet nothing." Taking the cue from Augustine ("God's grace prevents that we will, lest we will in vain"), Luther said, "In every single man God precedes with grace and works before we pray for grace and cooperate." Concerning the condition of the will in unregenerate man, Luther wrote: "Free will after the Fall is an empty title only, and sins mortally when it does what it is able to do, because the will is a captive to sin ...it is free only to do evil ...it adds sin to sin, becoming doubly guilty."

Luther's paramount statement on natural man's will is his *Bondage of the Will* (1525), his examination and refutation of Erasmus' *Philosophical Diatribe*, directed at Luther's teaching.

Erasmus was always trying to find the middle road between the "extremes," regardless of the truth. The free will, he said, is "the ability of the human will according to which man is able either to turn himself to what leads to eternal salvation, or to turn away from it." "They say that man cannot will anything good without special grace, ... cannot complete anything without... the constant help of divine grace. This opinion seems to be pretty probable, because it leaves to man a striving and an effort, and yet does not admit that he is to ascribe even the least to his own powers."

Luther's response: "If we believe that Christ has redeemed men by his blood, then we must confess that the entire man was lost; other wise we make Christ superfluous, or the Redeemer of but the meanest part of us, which is blasphemous and sacrilegious."

The key to Melanchthon's move away from Luther and Scripture lay in the third of his three concurring causes of conversion: the Holy Ghost, the Word, and the consenting will of man. His orthodox-sounding statements had a synergistic odor. He taught that man, when approached with the word of God, is able to assume an attitude pro or con. The will of man, "indeed, is not idle, but strives against its infirmity." Melanchthon endorsed Erasmus' definition of free will as "the power in man to apply himself to grace." Melanchthon attacked Luther's position indirectly by attacking the "extremism" of Flacius. His motive was to harmonize the paradox of universal grace over against the loss of the unbelievers (*cur alii prae aliis?*), positing different behaviors toward grace in different men. He is thus "credited" as the father of synergism and of modern rationalism.

When challenged at Worms (1557), Melanchthon insisted that his statements on the capacities of the will in his *Loci* (edition of 1548) referred to the will of regenerate man. The context of the statements, however, proves otherwise. He asserts that the will of natural man is different from that of the devils because he can apply his will to grace and can assent to it (can obey or resist). The saved have obviously made choices different from the lost with respect to God's grace, before conversion.

Melanchthon set out his 3 concurring causes in a writing on the Nicene Creed in 1550. The Holy Spirit is demoted to a cause which merely works on an equal level with the will of man (cooperates, concurs): "He draws him who is willing and assists him who assents." (see Mk 9:24) Evaluations of Melanchthon's position conclude that he professes that God makes man's conversion possible, but only the decision of man's free will makes it actual. It placed him squarely into the Roman camp.

Johannes Pfeffinger's *Five Questions Concerning the Liberty of the Human Will* defended Melanchthon's synergism. Thuringian theologians took to the battle field: Stolz, Amsdorf, Aurifaber, Flacius. Theses were framed and scuds were launched by both sides. Pfeffinger's Semi-Pelagianism was exposed. His own allies rallied to his support: Major, Eber, Crell, and Strigel. All moderation in debate was set aside. The synergists attacked Luther at the same point Erasmus had, his assertion of a "purely passive" will in natural man. But they claimed to leave undiminished the assistance given by the Holy Ghost to man in conversion. The powers for conversion, and assent, they claim, still reside in man, a residue of the perfect knowledge of God from before the Fall, and these powers need merely to be incited for man to be able to convert himself. Many of Pfeffinger's statements quoted by Bente sound thoroughly Lutheran. But the illusion is destroyed when he credits something in man as the cause of salvation. (Flacius would later have to split semantic hairs with Strigel to draw him into a clear statement of his synergism - a Renaissance version of "20 Questions").

A new twist was added as Jena entered the fray on the side of Pfeffinger. Strigel had been on the orthodox side in previous controversies.

The Book of Confutation edited by Flacius dealt with all the controversies the Lutherans had been engaged in so far. The standard for confessionalism in Ducal Saxony under John Frederick II, it became, in its later edition, with vague language removed, a foundation document for the Formula of Concord. Flacius' blue penciling enraged Strigel who charged Flacius with introducing new doctrines contrary to the spirit of the Augsburg Confession. Later, at Weimar, Flacius would discredit Strigel's arguments on the Augsburg Confession by showing that Strigel had cheated by quoting Melanchthon's *Variata*, not the UAC. The spirit of this time must have been akin to the spirit of the schismatic 60's and 70's in the LCMS.

Flacius and Strigel met at Weimar, August, 1560, to debate the issues of original sin and freewill in man. It was agreed that the standard for truth would be Scripture itself, and not interpretive writings. Strigel defended Melanchthon's 3 concurrent causes and Flacius defended Luther's "purely passive" doctrine of natural man. But here Flacius, in his zeal, set the stage for the ensuing (Flacian) controversy on the question whether original sin in man is accident or essence.

The Weimar Disputation ended in chaos, as the disputants hurled verbal pies into one another's faces. John Frederick scattered the surly mob and threw the synergists into jail. The positions of deposed orthodox theologians and teachers were restored and strengthened, but Melanchthon's ideas haunted them in the ambiguous language of some of the confessional and doctrinal writings in current use. The still-familiar cry of

the orthodox, “Let the woman (in this case, Reason) be silent in the Church” greeted Strigel and others who resorted to philosophy and logical contortions to refute the orthodox arguments from Scripture.

Bente covers the details of Strigel’s theology on pages 136-141 (including a summary of the arguments on both sides at Weimar, pages 139-141). Flacius was trying to be gracious, apparently. He worked under the assumption that Strigel was confused in his terminology (the booby trap that would catch Flacius himself). He was certain that Strigel, with instruction, would realize that he was erroneously applying the natural will’s abilities in external matters in the spiritual realm. Flacius was certain that Strigel meant to attribute to the regenerate will what he was crediting to the will of natural man. Strigel proved him wrong. Bente quotes Strigel’s famous analogies, including the analogy of the magnet covered with garlic juice. The magnet did not cease to function as a magnet because it smelled of garlic. Man’s free will, though corrupted by sin, does not cease to operate., either, not even in spiritual things.

He insisted that, if man can only resist God’s grace before conversion, then conversion is impossible. If man can only resist, then he is coerced and cannot be held accountable. Flacius tried once more - Strigel was simply failing to distinguish between the Old Adam and the new creation of the Holy Spirit. “It is the very essence of conversion that by the grace of God unwilling men are made willing.”

Here Bente states the position of the subscribers to the Formula of Concord. We’ll take that up as we examine the text of the confession, Article II, itself.

The Formula of Concord, Epitome, Article II, Of the Free Will *Concordia Triglotta, pages 785-791*

Status Controversiae

Of the four possible states in which the will of man can be found (before the Fall, since the Fall, after regeneration, and after the resurrection of the body), the focus of the article is upon the condition of the will of man in the second state, since the Fall (and *before* regeneration). What powers does he possess in his will in that state with respect to spiritual things? Before he is regenerated by the Holy Spirit, is he able by himself to dispose himself to God’s grace, prepare himself for it, and choose to accept or reject the grace of God offered by the Holy Spirit through the means of grace?

Affirmativa

According to the scriptural, Lutheran position

- 1) “Man’s reason and understanding in spiritual things are blind and incapable of understanding of their own powers. (see I Corinthians 2:14).
- 2) the unregenerate will is both turned away from God and hostile toward him so, that its inclination and desire is for evil, contrary to God’s will. (Genesis 8:21, Romans 8:7, Ephesians 2:5, 2 Corinthians 3:5).
- 3) God the Holy Ghost effects conversion through the means of the preaching and hearing of God’s word (Romans 1:16, Romans 10:17, Psalm 95:8, Acts 16:14). Conversion is the work of the Holy Ghost alone, effected by his grace and power, and without his grace and power, every effort of man accomplishes nothing, so that no one can boast (John 15:5, I Corinthians 1:29, 2 Corinthians 12:5, Jeremiah 9:23).

Negativa

These are rejected as contrary to God’s word

- 1) the determinism of the Stoics and the Manichaeans, which holds that all events occur according to irrevocable plan, that man acts under coercion, even in his evil works;
- 2) gross Pelagianism which attributes to unregenerate man the power, without the Holy Ghost, to turn to God, believe the Gospel, submit inwardly to the Law and obey it, and to merit forgiveness and eternal life;
- 3) Semi-Pelagianism, which attributes to unregenerate man the ability to make a beginning in his own conversion, which he cannot complete without the grace of the Holy Ghost;
- 4) synergism, which admits that man is too weak to make a beginning in his conversion, but, when offered grace by the Holy Ghost, through the preaching of the Word, thus beginning the process of conversion, man's natural will is able to cooperate and prepare for, embrace, and accept grace and believe the Gospel;
- 5) perfectionism, which attributes to man the ability to conform perfectly to God's will after conversion and to earn eternal life on his own merit;
- 6) enthusiasm, which claims that the Holy Ghost calls, enlightens, converts, and justifies natural man without the Means of Grace (inner light);
- 7) that in conversion God annihilates the Old Adam with the rational soul and creates from nothing a new essence of the soul;
- 8) the following statements, when used to oppose the doctrine of conversion by God's grace alone: that before, in, and after conversion man resists the Holy Ghost, but that the Holy Ghost confers his grace despite man's obstinacy; that man's will is not idle in conversion - but these may be correctly understood when they mean that God draws the willing whom he has made willing, and that man does cooperate in the works of the Holy Ghost after he has been converted;
- 9) Luther's "purely passive" statement when misapplied to the state of man's will after conversion - for man's will is no longer passive in spiritual things after conversion.

Conclusion

There are two efficient causes in the conversion of unregenerate man, the word of God and the Holy Spirit. It is only through the grace and operation of the Holy Ghost by the word that unregenerate man is converted.

The Formula of Concord, Thorough Declaration, Article II, Of the Free Will *Concordia Triglotta, pages 881-915*

Paragraphs

Preliminaries:

- 6,73** Purpose – to explain the issues in the controversy according to Scripture and to refute the errors on the basis of Scripture.
- 1-2** Focus - The question is narrowed and the focus sharpened in these paragraphs. excluded from discussion are the first, third, and fourth states of the unregenerated will, as enumerated in the "Status Controversiae" of the Epitome. The focus is on the second state: What the intellect and will of unregenerate man is able to do in his own conversion and regeneration from his own powers after the Fall - whether when God's word is preached and grace offered, he is able to accept and assent.
- 73** These related questions have arisen among the Evangelical congregations and will also be dealt with:

- a) whether man before, in, or after conversion resists the Holy Ghost,
- b) whether man does nothing at all but is passive before God,
- c) whether in conversion man acts and is like a block,
- d) whether the Holy Ghost is given to those who resist him,
- e) whether conversion occurs by coercion (God converts man against his will).

The True Scriptural Teaching Concerning the Will of Man

- 5** Statement of the position of the Augsburg Confession - Man's fall caused him to become spiritually blind, and unable to comprehend God's word, but has caused him to regard it as foolishness; he remains an enemy of God. Regeneration occurs when man is converted by the power of the Holy Ghost, who works graciously through the word, without the least cooperation on the part of man.
- 7-15** The nature of unregenerate man's will – What his will lacks
- a) the least spark of spiritual power remaining or present to enable himself to prepare for or accept grace, to be capable of grace, to apply or accommodate himself to grace, or to aid, do, work, or concur in working toward conversion, either in whole, or half, or the least part, but is a servant and slave of sin and the devil (Jn 8:34, Eph 2:2, 2 Tim 2:26), strong and active only with respect to what is displeasing and contrary to God
 - b) adequate natural knowledge of God and his law (Rm 1:19ff); his best efforts lead to the conclusion that the Gospel is foolishness (I Cor 2:14, I Cor 1:21, Ep 4:17f, Mt 13:11ff, Lk 8:18, Rm 3:11f). He is in darkness (Ep 5:8, Ac 26:18, Jn 1:5) and not only weak and sick, but dead (Ep 2:1,5 and Col 2:13). (paragraph 11 has analogy of physical & spiritual death)
 - c) any capacity to will or to cooperate in conversion (2 Cor 3:5, Rm 3:12, Jn 8:37, Jn 1:-5, I Cor 2:14, Rm 8:7, Jn 15:5, Ph 2:13). The prayers of the saints in Scripture affirm that under standing is a gift of God, which should move us to thank him for deliverance and regeneration (Ps 119, Ep 1::17, Col 1:9, Phil 1:9)
- 61-62** God is able to work both in rational and irrational beings, but man has no such capacity.
86 Therefore, any attribution of power to man's will to work in conversion is rejected.
59 What man's will possesses – a) his obstinacy makes man worse than a block or a stone. It
17 is turned away from him and hostile (Gen 8:22, Jer 17:9, Rm 8, Gal 5:17, Rm 7:14, Rm
18-19 18:23). Even regenerate man shows obstinacy; the unregenerate much more so. Scripture
53 calls the unregenerate heart a stone and a wild beast. The unregenerate will can be
20-24 positively exercised only in external (non-spiritual) matters. b) man's passivity was
commented on by Luther in his exposition of Ps 90, where he likens man's will to a pillar
of salt, Lot's wife, a lifeless statue. He fails to perceive God's wrath and so goes to his
death with false security. The word is lost on him until he is converted, which wills for
him, through the gracious operation of the Holy Ghost through the word.
- 25-29** God alone effects conversion in man – This work is clearly ascribed by Scripture to God alone. Man can have an outward decency, but only the Holy Spirit can effect inward change and open the understanding. Without his working the heart is too weak to do good and is possessed by the devil. (Lk 24:45, Ac 16:14, Ph 2:13, Ac 5:31, 2 Tim 2:25, Ph 1:29, Eph 2:8, Jn 6:29, Dt 29:4, Mt 13:15, Tt 3:5-6, Ez 11:19, Dt 30:6, Ps 51:10, Ep 2:10, 2 Cor 5:17, Gal 6:15, Js 1:17, Jn 6:44, Mt 11:27, I Cor 12:3, Jn 15:5, 2 Cor 3:5, I Cor 4:7)

The Lutheran confessional writings have all maintained the position presented here in the Formula of Concord –

- 5 *AC* – man has freedom in external matters, but in spiritual things, is incapable and captive
- 30-32 to Satan, unable to trust God, initiate conversion, and therefore Godless.
- 33-35 *SA* – rejects the notions that man may choose good and omit evil, and that Scripture does not teach the necessity of the Holy Ghost in conversion; positively it states that repentance continues in the regenerate because he contends with his flesh (Rm7:23), and that the gift of the Holy Ghost which follows remission renders man truly holy.
- 36-39 *LC* – ascribes everything to the Holy Ghost; through the office of the ministry he brings souls into the church, sanctifies, and brings about daily growth in faith and good works. Even though the regenerate will, love, do, and grow in good, this is the work of the Holy Ghost (Ph 2:3, Ep 2:10).
- 40-41 *SC* – in the 3rd Article, “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength ...but the Holy Ghost...” and in the 2nd Petition, “When our Heavenly Father gives us his Holy Spirit, so that by his grace, we believe...”
- 42-45 *In summary, on the Confessions* – our confessions recognize no will or cooperation on the part of man in conversion. All dogmas which extoll the will in the unregenerate are errors. He does not possess the power to cooperate in conversion or to receive the Gospel or derive any comfort from it.

Positions Contrary to the True Teaching of Scripture

These have been addressed on page 4, under the “Negativa” of the *Epitome*. The specific paragraphs are given with their topics so that you may check the details and the Scripture references provided in the *Thorough Declaration*.

- 3, 76 *Semi-Pelagianism* (Man initiates, God actualizes)
- 4, 80 *Enthusiasm* (immediate conversion)
- 46 *Enthusiasm, Epicuriansim, slothfulness* among the regenerate
- 74 *Stoicism, Manicæanism* (deterministic, fatalistic)
- 75 *Gross Pelagianism* (man’s monergistic capabilities)
- 77-78 *Synergism* (God initiates, man meets and cooperates)
- 79 *Papist perfectionism* (regenerate man righteous in own merits)
- 81 *Annihilation of Old Adam, recreation of essence of soul*
- 82 *Ambiguous expressions misapplied or used without explanation*

The True Scriptural Teaching Concerning the Holy Spirit’s Work of Conversion in Unregenerate Man and Concerning the Nature of Regenerate Man

- 90 The raw material in conversion (refuting Melanchthon’s 3rd concurring cause in conversion) – “The intellect and will of the unregenerate man are nothing else than *subjectum convertendum*, it being the intellect and will of a spiritually dead man, in whom the Holy Ghost works conversion and renewal, towards wqch work man’s will that is to be converted does nothing, but suffers God alone to work in him, until he is regenerate; and then he works also with the Holy Ghost that which is pleasing to God in other good works that follow.”

- 49** God wills the salvation of all (2 Pt 3:9, Ez 33:11, Jn 3:16)
- 83** Conversion defined – No conversion takes place where no internal change takes place and man resists the word. For those who resist grieve and lose the Holy Ghost. Conversion “is such a change through the operation of the Holy Ghost in the intellect, will, and heart of man, that by this operation of the Holy Ghost, man can accept the offered grace.”
- 87** Conversion of the corrupt will is the resuscitation from spiritual death effected by God alone.
- 89** Luther: man is purely passive; does nothing toward conversion, but suffers what God works in him: “Conversion ...is wholly an operation, gift, present, and work of the Holy Ghost alone, who accomplishes and effects it by his power and might, through the word, in the intellect, will and heart of man.
- 48, 52** The Means of Grace are the Holy Spirit’s instrument in conversion – Preaching and hearing God’s word are the instruments by which the Holy Ghost desires to work efficaciously to convert man to God and to work in him to will and to do God’s will.
- 50-51** Therefore God has the Law and Gospel preached and through preaching builds up his Church, works in the heart repentance and knowledge and faith in Christ, and calls, draws, converts, regenerates and sanctifies. (I Co 1:21, Ac 10:5-6, Rm 10:17, Jn 17:17,20). Therefore, the Father says of the Son and of those who preach the Gospel, “Hear him!” (Mt 17:5)
- 54** Preaching of Law and Gospel has this effect: Law works knowledge of sin and wrath, and terror leads to contrition and sorrow. As the Gospel is preached and considered, the message of forgiveness kindles a spark of faith which accepts forgiveness, and comforts itself with the Gospel’s promises. Thus the Holy Ghost enters the heart (Ga 4:6).
- 55-56** Neither preaching nor hearing is efficacious, but the working of the Holy Ghost through the word is efficacious in conversion. The preacher and the hearer should not doubt that the Holy Ghost will work through the word. This assurance is not from feelings, but from the promises of the word (2 Cor 2:14ff, 3:5ff).
- 57-58** Those who despise the word deprive themselves of comfort, for it is through the word that God promises to work. It is no injustice done by the Holy Ghost when those who despise the word remain in darkness (Mt 23:37).
- 60** God coerces no one to godliness, “yet God the Lord draws the man whom he wishes (decreed) to convert, and draws him in such a way that his darkened understanding is turned into an enlightened one and his perverse will into an obedient one and this is what the Scriptures call “creating a new heart” (Ps 51:10).
- 63-64** Incidentally, on the condition of regenerate man - Man wills what is good when he has been converted, enlightened, and his will has been renewed (Rm 7:22), not by coercion, but spontaneously (Ps 110:4). But a striving with the flesh remains (Rm 7:22ff, Gal. 5:17)
- 65-66** As soon as the Holy Ghost has begun regeneration and renewal, we can cooperate. Were the Holy Ghost’s power withdrawn, however, man could not persevere in cooperation. The man and the Holy Ghost cannot be compared to two horses drawing a wagon together (2 Cor 6:1, I Cor 3:9, I Cor 15:10, 2 Cor 6:16)
- 67** The unbaptized are able only to hear, but the baptized are able both to hear and to assent.

- 68-69** Here we receive only the first fruits of the Spirit, the new birth is not complete. The struggle against the flesh continues (refutes perfectionism). But when the baptized lapse into sin, there is no need to rebaptize, but only to convert again.
- 84-85** The unregenerate resists God altogether and is entirely a servant of sin. (Jn 8:34, Rm 6:16). In the regenerate, there is inner delight in the Law, but he sees in his members the law of sin (there is also an obstinacy – Ga 5:17, I Pt 2:11, Rm 7:23). On this account he serves the Law of God with his mind, but with the flesh, the law of sin (Rm 7:25).
- 88** God in conversion changes unwilling men into willing by the drawing of the Holy Ghost after man is regenerated, he cooperates in the works of the Holy Spirit.

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Some thoughts for discussion and application –

- 14, 47** Those who “feel” a weakness of faith can be comforted by the assurance that conversion is the work of the Holy Ghost, not of man.
- 15, 16** Suggestions for the prayer list: some spiritual gifts to thank God for.
- 24** Evangelism committees should remember that unbelievers are not just uninformed.
- 34-35, 85** The struggle between the flesh and the new creation of the Holy Ghost can be considered a sign of spiritual health (a spiritual vital sign).
- 36-38, 51** As we equip and encourage people for their part in the universal priesthood, the called ministry ought to be emphasized in preaching and teaching, in all its forms, as an essential tool of the Holy Ghost.
- 52** A pastor or a teacher cannot exercise his ministry without the Word.
- 54, 84** The preaching and teaching of the Law in its 3 uses is necessary, even with the regenerate.
- 55-56** These paragraphs present a particularly useful explanation of the way in which law and Gospel work together.
- These paragraphs provide special comfort and assurance for preacher and hearer alike.
- 57-58** Free will sounds like a great idea, until it’s time to pay the piper.
- 68-69** Here’s something to say when the spiritual “high” takes a nosedive.
- Warning and hope: there may be recovery for a lapse.