

Create in Me a Clean Heart, O God!

A Sermon Study on Psalm 51:10–12

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[This is the second in a series of sermon studies on the 12 articles of the Formula of Concord. The Synod's Formula of Concord Anniversary Committee proposed the series to the homiletics department of the Seminary as a part of its planned observance of the anniversaries of the Formula of Concord and of the Book of Concord.]

The familiar words of the Offertory may well serve as the text for a sermon on the first two articles of the Formula of Concord. Article I, "Of Original Sin," is closely related to Article II, "Of Free Will." The preacher will not find it difficult, therefore, to treat both articles in one sermon.

The Flacian Controversy forms the background for Article I and the Synergistic Controversy the background for Article II of the Formula. In fact, the Flacian Controversy grew out of the Synergistic Controversy. When Melancthon and his followers after Luther's death in 1546 began to chip away at the scriptural doctrine of salvation *sola gratia*, Matthias Flacius Illyricus ably and zealously championed this fundamental principle of the Lutheran Reformation. Unfortunately, in his zeal to deny natural man any credit for his conversion Flacius made some extreme statements which he stubbornly refused to retract even when their false implications were pointed out to him.

In the heat of a debate with Victorin Strigel, a defender of Melancthon's synergism, Flacius made the mistake of stating that original sin is not merely an "accident," but the very essence or substance of natural, unregenerate man. "Accident" is a philosophical term used to describe a quality or characteristic of a thing, whereas "substance" refers to the thing itself.

Strigel was right in stating that original sin is an accident, but he was wrong in minimizing it as a mere superficial blemish. Flacius was right in insisting that it is a deep-seated corruption which has thoroughly permeated man's nature ever since the Fall, but he was wrong in not distinguishing carefully between it and man's substance. Paul makes such a distinction in Romans 7:17, "Now it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me." In this passage Paul distinguishes between his true self ("I") and the sin that inhabits and corrupts his nature. The Formula of Concord teaches correctly, therefore, when it maintains that the distinction between man's nature and original sin "is as great as the distinction between a work of God and a work of the devil" (Epit., I:2; *Concordia Triglotta* [St. Louis, 1921], p 779). It also insists, however, that "original sin is not a slight, but so deep a corruption of human nature that nothing healthy or uncorrupt has remained in man's body or soul, in his inner or outward powers" (Epit., I:8; *Trig.*, p 781).

In his sermon preparation the preacher will want to study the history of both the Synergistic and Flacian Controversies. The former can be found in the *Concordia Triglotta*, pages 124–143, and the latter on pages 144–152. He will also want to read the articles themselves in the Formula of Concord. It is self-evident, of course, that he will follow the advice of the Formula. "As to the Latin words *substantia* and *accidens*, a church of plain people ought to be spared these terms in public sermons" (Thor. Decl., I:54; *Trig.*, p 877). It will be the preacher's task, therefore, to present the scriptural truths in non-technical language.

Melancthon, Luther's co-worker, was responsible for the Synergistic Controversy. Luther taught that man's salvation is due solely to the grace of God. Ephesians 2:8–9 clearly states, "By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast." Nevertheless, as early as 1532 Melancthon began to ascribe to man a part in his election. With increasing boldness also, especially after Luther's death, he added the human will to the Word of God and the Holy Spirit as a third cause of conversion. He spoke of man's free will as the ability to apply himself to grace. In an attempt to answer the question why some are saved and others not, he declared, "Since the promise is universal, and since there are no contradictory wills in God, there must of necessity be some dissimilar action in these two" (Introduction, *Trig.*, p 130).

Melanchthon's doctrine that unregenerate man's will is free to take an attitude either for or against God's grace was in clear contradiction to Ephesians 2:1, "And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins," and Romans 8:7, "The carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be." These passages teach that natural man is spiritually dead. He has no desire and no ability to accept God's grace.

Article II of the Formula of Concord rejects the synergistic doctrines of Melanchthon and his adherents in no uncertain terms. It declares, "In spiritual and divine things the intellect, heart, and will of the unregenerate man are utterly unable, by their own natural powers, to understand, believe, accept, think, will, begin, effect, work, or concur in working, anything, but they are entirely dead to what is good, and corrupt" (Thor. Decl., II:7; *Trig.*, p 883). It insists, "The Holy Scriptures ascribe conversion, faith in Christ, regeneration, renewal, and all that belongs to their efficacious beginning and completion, not to the human powers of the natural free will, neither entirely, nor half, nor in any, even the least or most inconsiderate part, but *in solidum*, that is, entirely and solely, to the divine working and the Holy Spirit" (Thor. Decl., II:25; *Trig.*, p 891).

Psalm 51 presents a clear Old Testament basis for both the doctrine of original sin and the doctrine of justification by grace alone. It is one of the seven penitential Psalms. From the superscription we know that it was written by David after the prophet Nathan came to him to call him to repentance. David had fallen into the shameful sins of adultery and murder. He had taken Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite, and tried to cover up his sin by arranging for Uriah to be killed in battle (2 Sm 11). For nearly a year David remained impenitent. But then God in His grace sent Nathan to him. The prophet's stern preaching of the law broke through the hard shell of David's calloused conscience. "I have sinned against the Lord," David confessed, and then Nathan offered David the comfort of the gospel, "The Lord also hath put away thy sin; thou shalt not die" (1 Sm 12:1–13).

Although only verses 10–12 of Psalm 51 comprise the text proper, the preacher will want to study the entire Psalm as part of his sermon preparation. The sermon will be enriched if he utilizes thoughts from the rest of the Psalm in his exposition of the text.

David begins with the urgent plea, "Have mercy upon me, O God, according unto thy lovingkindness" (v 1). He appeals to God's דֶּסֶדֶד , His covenant love, and prays that He would wash away all his guilt (עֲוֹן) and cleanse him of his sin (תַּחַטְּפֶהָ), his missing the mark of perfect holiness, which God demands (v 2). Humbly he confesses, "I acknowledge my transgressions (פְּשָׁעַי): and my sin is ever before me" (v 3). He admits that his sin has been a flagrant transgression of God's holy law: "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight" (v 4).

David recognizes that his heart is sinful and unclean by nature. Not only is he guilty of such shameful deeds as adultery, murder, and deception, but his whole being is permeated with sin. In verse 5 he confesses, "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me." This is not an accusation against his parents, as some have interpreted it, but an admission of the total depravity of his nature. By nature he can do nothing good in the sight of God because of his inherited corruption.

This verse is one of the *sedes doctrinae* for the doctrine of original sin. It reasserts the truth stated by God immediately after the Flood, "The imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth" (Gn 8:21). According to these passages, sin is no mere superficial blemish, as Strigel claimed. It is a deep-seated corruption and evil, as the Formula of Concord teaches.

David looked to God to teach him true wisdom (v 6), the wisdom that makes a man "wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus," as Paul puts it (2 Tm 3:15). He pleads that God would purge him with hyssop (v 7), the stalks of the plant used to paint the door frame with the blood of the Passover lamb (Ex 12:22) and in various Levitical rites of purification (Nu 19:18). These Old Testament ceremonies pointed ahead to the cleansing that would be effected by the blood of God's own Son. David appeals to God because he recognizes that He alone can cleanse his sin-stained soul. His cleansing will be so complete that David will then be "whiter than snow" (v 7). He longs to hear the Lord's words of forgiveness and pardon (v 8). Only they can bring joy to his tormented heart. He prays that God would hide His face from his sins, not charging them against him, but blotting them out of His sight forever (v 9).

David now follows his prayer for forgiveness with a prayer for sanctification, the text for this sermon.

Verse 10

“Create a clean heart for me, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.”

The heart is the seat of a person’s life. It is the power plant that motivates and activates all of one’s actions. If it is polluted, it will produce “evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies” (Mt 15:19). If it is clean, it will produce the God-pleasing fruits of “love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance” (Ga 5:22–23).

A clean heart is one that has been washed and cleansed by the blood of Christ, the Lamb of God that has taken away the sin of the world (Jn 1:29). The sinner who believes in Christ Jesus has such a clean heart. He has a good conscience and desires to serve God in thankful obedience. In the Hebrew the words “a clean heart” are in the emphatic position at the beginning of the sentence.

The verb בָּרַע, “create,” describes a divine act, one which only God can perform. It does not in itself mean “to make out of nothing.” In Genesis 1:27 we are told, “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.” Three times a form of the verb בָּרַע is used. From Genesis 2:7 we see, however, that God formed man of the dust of the ground. Koehler-Baumgartner’s *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1958) lists three roots spelled בָּרַע and says of the first that it “is a theological term the subject of which is God exclusively.” By using the word בָּרַע David is confessing that it is not in his power to produce a clean heart within himself. God must give him such a heart. He calls upon God to purify his sin-polluted heart by the power of His divine grace and to give him new spiritual powers.

David prays that God renew him by restoring an upright spirit within him. The word “renew” suggests that David once possessed such a spirit, but that he had forfeited it by his sins. The word נָכוֹן is the niphil participle of כָּוַן. It means “fixed, firmly established, steadfast.” David is asking for a heart that is firmly anchored in God’s covenant (Ps 78:37) and “established with grace” (He 13:9). He desires a heart that will stand firm against all the temptations of the Evil One and that will constantly follow God’s Word and will as its only guide (Ps 119:9).

Verse 11

“Do not drive me away from Your presence, and do not take Your Holy Spirit away from me.”

David recognizes that he deserves to be banished from God’s joyful presence into that hopeless darkness where there is only weeping and gnashing of teeth. He admits that because of his outrageous sins God would be fully justified in taking His Holy Spirit away from him as He once took Him away from Saul (1 Sm 16:14). Without the help of the Holy Ghost David would be unable to do anything pleasing to God for, as Paul says, “It is God that worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure” (Php 2:13; cf. also 2 Th 2:13). As a believing child of God, David wants to be guided and governed by God’s Spirit. He wants to avoid everything that might separate him again from God and hinder the Spirit’s work of sanctification in his heart and life.

While conversion is the work of God’s Spirit alone and synergism in every form is excluded in this sphere, the believer can and does cooperate with the Spirit of God in his own sanctification (1 Cor 3:9; 2 Cor 6:1). The Formula of Concord points out, however, that it is not to be supposed “that the converted man cooperates with the Holy Ghost in the manner as when two horses together draw a wagon” (Thor. Decl. II:66; *Trig.*, p 907.) It is not cooperation on a parity basis. Rather, in this cooperation the Holy Spirit does the lion’s share. He creates the desire and supplies the ability to do God’s will. He creates the new spiritual life which manifests itself in the cooperation of the believer’s New Man with God’s Spirit.

Verse 12

“Give me again the joy of Your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.”

The big word in this verse is “salvation” (יִשְׁעָי). It means “deliverance, rescue.” It is the root from which the name “Jesus,” meaning “Savior,” comes. The suffix indicates that David recognizes that his salvation has its source in God alone. If David is to be rescued, God must do it. And He has done it. In God’s sight the sacrifice brought by Christ is an eternal reality. He is “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Re 13:8).

God’s wondrous gift of salvation brings joy, indescribable joy, to guilty sinners. Before his tragic fall David knew this joy. The assurance that he was at peace with God made his heart glad. All of that was shattered, however, by his rash act of adultery and his foolish attempt to conceal the crime. David pleads with God to restore the joy and peace he has forfeited. He begs Him also to uphold, support, and strengthen him by giving him a willing spirit (רִיחַ נְדִיבָה), a sincere determination to serve and obey the Lord in heartfelt, thankful love. The verb יָמַד, “uphold,” takes a double accusative.

The King James Version translates the last clause of this verse, “And uphold me with thy free spirit.” The absence of a suffix on the noun רִיחַ (in v 11 it has the suffix) and the previous reference to David’s spirit in verse 10 make it improbable, however, that the reference here is to the Holy Spirit. This is recognized in every one of the dozen modern translations this writer has on his shelves. Except for the bland word “help” when the more vigorous and theologically meaningful word “salvation” (יִשְׁעָי) is called for, Beck renders the verse quite well: “Give me again the joy of Your help and a willing spirit to strengthen me.” The TEV paraphrases the last clause: “Give me again the joy that comes from your salvation, and make my spirit obedient.”

Such a spirit is a gift of God. Rejoicing in the hope of salvation, God’s people serve Him with thankful, loving hearts (Ps 110:3; 119:32). The Formula of Concord quotes Augustine: “God makes willing persons out of the unwilling and dwells in the willing” (Epit., II:15; *Trig.*, p 789).

The preacher will note that David’s prayer for sanctification is interwoven with his prayer for justification. The two go hand in hand. Sanctification flows out of justification. It is a fruit of justifying faith. Without faith it is impossible to please God (He 11:6), but a living faith, like a good tree, naturally and without fail brings forth good fruit (Mt 7:17).

In the closing verse of this Psalm David speaks of the offerings he intends to bring to God. He will share the good news of salvation with others (v 13). He will sing the Lord’s praises, as he does in this very Psalm (vv 14–15). He will offer to God the sacrifice of a penitent, contrite heart, which God, according to His promise, will not despise (vv 16–17). And, finally, he asks God to repair the damage done to the walls of Zion, God’s church, by the offense his sin has given (v 18). In joyful faith God’s people will then offer sacrifices to Him that will be acceptable in His sight (v 19).

Homiletical Hints

Since this sermon is to be the second in this series commemorating the 400th anniversary of the Formula of Concord and the Book of Concord, the introduction may review briefly (!) what was said in the initial sermon of the series. This will serve as a refresher for those who heard that sermon, and it will set a stage for those in the congregation who may not have heard it.

The preacher may then lead up to the theme for this sermon on the first two articles of the Formula by pointing out that these articles discuss the condition of man which makes it necessary for God to do everything if sinners are to be saved. They are guilty in God’s sight by virtue of their original or inherited sin as Article I declares, and they are helpless to save themselves or even to cooperate in their conversion because they are by nature spiritually blind and dead as Article II teaches. David recognized this also, as we see from this text, the words which are the Offertory or prayer that we customarily sing in our services immediately after the sermon.

The following outline is offered as a suggestion to show how this text may be utilized in this anniversary series. The Scripture references which are listed are not all intended for actual quotation in the sermon. Some of

them will merely be alluded to as the preacher weaves the language of the passage into the development of his thoughts.

Create in Me a Clean Heart, O God!

- I. Such a heart recognizes its guilt.
 - A. The guilt of actual sins
 1. David's sins of adultery, murder, and deception (the superscription, vv 1–3,14)
 2. These were sins not only against others, but against God (v 4).
 - a) He is the Lawgiver.
 - b) He demands perfect obedience.
 - c) All sin is a violation of His holy will.
 3. We, like David, commit many actual sins every day.
 - a) Sins of commission
 - aa) Sins against the 6th Commandment
 - bb) Sins against the 5th Commandment
 - cc) Sins against the 8th Commandment
 - dd) Sins against the whole law (Jas 2:10)
 - b) Sins of omission
 - B. The guilt of original sin
 1. Adam's sin is charged against us (Ro 5:12,18)
 2. We have inherited a sinful nature (v 5)
 - a) Our nature is thoroughly corrupt (Gn 8:21; Jn 3:6)
 - b) How great this hereditary evil is "must be learned and believed from the Scriptures" (FC, Thor. Decl., I:8).
 - c) Though sin permeates our nature, it is distinct from it (Ro 7:18a)
 3. Original sin is the root of all actual sin (Mt 15:19)
 4. Original sin "is a work of the devil" (Thor. Decl., I:2)
 - C. God's just judgment
 1. The loss of His Spirit (v 11b; Eph 4:30)
 2. Banishment from His presence into the darkness of hell (v 11a; Mt 25:41)
 3. This is what all of us justly deserve.
- II. Such a heart rejoices in its Savior.
 - A. God planned, promised, and accomplished our salvation ("*thy* salvation," v 12).
 1. Through His Son, Jesus Christ
 - a) He kept all the demands of God's law in our stead (Jn 8:46).
 - b) He suffered the punishment for our sin as our Substitute (Is 53:5).
 - c) His resurrection is the seal of our justification (Ro 4:25).
 2. By grace (Eph 2:8,9)
 3. Including all people ("the world," 2 Cor 5:19)
 - B. This becomes ours through faith (Mk 16:16).
 - C. Only God can create a new, believing heart in us (v 10).
 1. By nature we are spiritually dead (Eph 2:1; Thor. Decl., II:7).
 2. Spiritual life is God's creation, a work of the Holy Ghost (Jn 6:63; 1 Cor 12:3; Thor. Decl., II:25).
 3. He creates faith by means of the gospel in the Word and sacraments.
 - D. God's salvation brings joy and peace to our sin-troubled hearts (v 12a).
- III. Such a heart reflects its gratitude.
 - A. Thankful love is a natural fruit of faith (1 Jn 4:19).

1. It confesses God's truth as David did (v 13).
 2. It sings God's praises as David did (v 14).
 - B. One who has a clean heart has a willing spirit (v 12b).
 1. He does God's will willingly (Ps 110:3; 119:32).
 2. Augustine: "God makes willing persons out of the unwilling and dwells in the willing" (Epit., II:15).
 3. The New Man cooperates with God as we live a sanctified, Christian life (Thor. Decl., II:66).
 - C. One who has a clean heart has a "right" or steadfast spirit (v 10b).
 1. Such a spirit stands firm in God's Word of truth (He 13:9; Ps 119:9).
 2. Such a spirit is strengthened by God's Spirit to resist the temptations of the Evil One.
- Conclusion: Whenever we sing the Offertory in our services after the sermon, we are asking God to create a clean heart in us. We are asking Him to give us a heart that recognizes its guilt, that rejoices in its Savior, and that reflects its gratitude. The Formula of Concord shows us from Scripture how much we need to pray this prayer. God give us all such a heart!