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Essay #3

**The Formula of Concord Article I:
Original Sin and Article II: Free Will**

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When the Planning Committee of the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference (CELC) invited me to write this essay on the Formula of Concord: Article I on Original Sin and Article II on Free Will, two realities came to my mind. First, this essay is a study on very important topics which deal with the unwelcomed condition of human beings. Second, this study reminds us of the pattern human beings follow since the Garden of Eden, for example, denying one's weakness, pretending as if everything is alright, considering oneself free from guilt after sinning, and shifting blame on to the Creator or to other human being(s) or to other creature(s). Most often this happens both among the followers of traditional religions, for example, the *Tsemay* people¹ in southwestern Ethiopia, and among Christians in the modern world.

The *Tsemay* people are predominantly followers of their ethnic religion.² They have two traditional beliefs concerning how death came upon the human race and concerning sin which they call *Mingi*, an equivalent of shame and guilt.³ One of their traditional beliefs is that the nine tribes in the *Tsemay* people came into being as result of incest⁴ between a mother with her son and a father with his daughter, which they believe was wrong. Until this sad event happened, there was no death among the *Tsemay* people. At this event, God, the Creator, said, "You have sinned with incest and you will be punished." Therefore, all diseases were created, such as lung diseases, and people began dying. After God passed the judgment, he gave nine girls who became mothers to the nine tribes of the *Tsemay* people. And the *Tsemay* people believe that from that time onward people abstained from sinning and started living happily.

¹ The *Tsemay* people (also spelled *Tsamai*, *Tsamay*, *Tsemai*, *Tsamako*, or *Tsamakko*) are one of the ethnic groups of southwestern Ethiopia. They speak a Cushitic language called *Tsamai*. According to the most recent official census in 1998 E.C. (2007 G.C.), the population of the *Tsemay* people was 9,702 of the total population of Ethiopia which was 73,918,505. The majority of the *Tsemay* people, i.e., 74.5% practice traditional beliefs and 10.87% are Protestant and 7.74% are Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity.

² The *Tsemay* people believe that the male and female star created the world. Since they believe that God is the Creator of the male and female star which created the world, it is God who created the world using this star.

³ These two traditional beliefs of *Tsemay* people are findings from the interviews which the writer of this essay conducted with one of his seminarians who belong to the *Tsemay* people and with elderly *Tsemay* men from his home area for research on the *Comparative Study of the Traditional Understanding with the Biblical and Confessional Lutheran Understanding Concerning Sin and Evil*.

⁴ Incest is a sexual intercourse between persons too closely related to marry, like between a parent and a child.

The other traditional belief of the *Tsemay* people is that the first greatest failure of the first human being that brought death, which Christians call the fall into sin or original sin, did not happen because of any wrong with the thought, speech, and action of the first human being. Instead, it happened when God, the Creator, put the chance for the snake and the first human being to choose one of the two actions without telling them which one to choose and the consequence of the choice. The Creator, God, put before them a “handful of soil” and a small non-edible fruit whose color and shape looks like an orange, traditionally called “*imbuway*.” Its scientific name is *Solanum incanum*. Many might know it by the name “thorn apple” or “bitter apple.”⁵ The expected action was choosing either the “handful of soil” or the “*imbuway*” and throwing it into the water and waiting for the consequence. Their traditional belief is that because the snake is so wise and selfish, he chose the “*imbuway*” and threw it into the water while the first human being is left with the “handful of soil” to throw into the water. The consequence of this action became for the snake to live for eternity and for the human being to live for some years and die forever. According to their belief, because of this choice the snake never dies and even when it is killed, it licks dust and revives again and lives for eternity shading its skin and preparing its poison from the “*imbuway*.” On the contrary, the human being began facing physical death, i.e., returning to soil or dust, without any hope for the resurrection on the last day which Christians believe. In short, the traditional *Tsemay* people believe that the first failure which brought death upon human beings did not happen because of the mistake of the first human being but because the snake tricked the human being by choosing the best for himself.

Since the days of the above two sad events, for the followers of the traditional religion among *Tsemay* people, everything that is contrary to the will of the Creator, God, which we Lutherans call “sin”, they call *Mingi*, the English equivalent of shame or guilt. *Mingi* also includes all non-acceptable thoughts, speech, and actions among the *Tsemay* people. For example, the *Tsemay* people, unlike most other people in rural Ethiopia, do not have a laid down custom that emphasizes girls remaining virgin until their official day of marriage. In other words, a *Tsemay* girl can have a sexual partner with whom she can engage in premarital relations and that is not *Mingi*. However, engaging or not engaging in this action has two consequences. On the one hand, if she remained virgin until her official day of marriage, she would be considered as one of the hated women no man approaches for sexual relations. And that is *Mingi* for her and her family. On the other hand, the *Tsemay* culture strictly prohibits the girls from bearing a child out of the sexual relations before the official day of marriage. That means the freedom to have a pre-marital sexual partner does not necessarily guarantee the freedom to bear a child, which in turn necessitates marriage. If the girl bears a child from the pre-marital sexual relations, it is *Mingi*. And this exposes her and her baby to be thrown from a cliff down to the bush with no one to bury their dead body. In order to avoid the supposed shame of remaining non-virgin, she engages in premarital sex before her wedding day. And to avoid the shame of possible pregnancy she would chew some kind of leaves or roots which their wiser old women recommend. Except for using this natural pregnancy prevention method, all other methods such as abortion or using contraceptives or other scientific family planning methods are *Mingi* because they believe that it is murdering babies in their mothers’ wombs.

Mingi, an equivalent of shame or guilt, is different from what the Bible and the Lutheran Confessions teach concerning original sin, actual sin, and sin in general. This essay highlights

⁵ Wikipedia page for *Solanum incanum*, on <https://wikipedia.org>.

the truth concerning original sin and its consequences related to the free will of human beings.

Among many Christians of the modern world, even pastors and theologians who studied the Lutheran Confessions at Lutheran seminaries, the significance of the sound teachings of Scripture is not very visible in their life and ministry. Instead, most of the members of the Christian churches, especially the Protestant denominations, for example, the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY)⁶ are victims of false teachings even though they claim to be Lutherans. Most of them failed to stand firm on the teachings of the Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, partly because of the church's longstanding affiliation with the Presbyterians and Lutherans who are greatly influenced by Pietism, liberalism, and the social gospel,⁷ and partly because most ministers and members are exposed to the false teachings and practices of modern Evangelicals⁸ over modern communication technology and social media. Using these, the false teachers easily propagate their false teachings such as their denial of justification by faith alone, infant baptism, and the salvific nature of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and their adoption of perfect or complete sanctification and decision theology. Contending with the false teachers and their false teachings⁹ is a real challenge because the real problems are lack of knowledge among the majority of members and lack of deeper understanding among Lutheran seminary graduates and most likely negligence and lack of commitment to remain confessional Lutheran Christians who are able to set good examples for many Christians and non-Christians.

The teachings of the liberal churches, the Pietists, and the modern Evangelicals are different from what the Bible and the Lutheran Confessions teach concerning original sin and free will and concerning the doctrines intertwined with them because these churches are led by human reason and emotion instead of being led by the Scripture alone. The purpose of this essay is to highlight the fundamentals of these two doctrines on the basis of the Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions. And that is one of the reasons why the seminaries and worker training programs of the CELC member churches¹⁰ should continue training and sending numerous

⁶ The EECMY started as a Lutheran denomination in 1959 in Addis Ababa after the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church (EOTC) opposed the intention of the Lutheran missionaries from Germany, America, and Sweden to reform the EOTC from within. The statistics from 2019 show that it had 10,404,128 members, 3,000 ministers in 8,500 congregations, and 4,000 preaching centers in many parts of Ethiopia and among many tribes and languages.

⁷ The EECMY has been working for many years with many churches such as the Presbyterian Church of America, the Scandinavian Lutherans in Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland, and Germany, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, the Lutheran World Federation, and World Council of Churches, whose stand for the truth of the Scripture is problematic.

⁸ Modern Evangelicals are churches such as Methodist and churches that promote the holiness movement, for example, the Church of the Nazarene and the Church of God, Pentecostals, and Neo-Pentecostals.

⁹ The attacks on the doctrines discussed in this essay (original sin and free will) have developed gradually during the monarchy and the Communist government. The attack spread very fast and overwhelmed the Christian churches during the last thirty years. The prominent teachers of the false teachings are everywhere in the pattern of popular false teachers in the world, for example, Pentecostals, Neo-Pentecostals, Mennonites, and Presbyterians.

¹⁰ For example, the Lutheran Church of Ethiopia (LCE), a member church in the CELC, which has 458 members all over Ethiopia, and its Maor (Light) Lutheran Theological Seminary are the lonely conservative confessional Lutheran voices among a population of more than 110 million. According to the most recent official census in 2007, 43.5% adhere to the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church (EOTC), 33.9% are Sunni Muslim, 18.6% belong to evangelical Christian and Pentecostal groups, and the remaining 3.9% are Eastern Rite and Roman Catholics, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, practitioners of indigenous religions, and the Rastafarian community. Most observers believe that the evangelical and Pentecostal proportion has increased after this census.

competent, committed, and faithful confessional Lutheran pastors, theologians, and missionaries to reach many people with the truth of the Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions.

The abovementioned realities among the traditional people and among Christians of the modern world call for the revisiting of the Formula of Concord, which fleshes out the true teachings and the false teachings in black and white related to original sin and free will, which pertain to salvation and to the fundamental doctrines of the Bible, for example, conversion, justification, sanctification, and baptism.

This essay briefly presents the historical situation that led to the discussion on original sin and free will and on the theological struggles that flow from the historical situation, which continue even today in connection to other doctrines. It will be useful for the CELC member churches and for the churches outside of our fellowship to read because many people in our world deny original sin and infant baptism, and many people are not clear on righteousness and the monergism of grace or divine monergism, the term which is defined in the next section of this essay. Therefore, this essay is presented in simpler language with explanations to be understood by a wide variety of people from around the world with varying levels of English proficiency and theological depth, and practical helps are offered for people who are confessing the Lutheran faith in the 21st century.

Definition of Terms and Their Usage by the Authors of the Formula of Concord

Determinism is a false view on conversion that man is either elected for heaven and thus saved by irresistible grace, or elected for damnation. This false view was held by Calvin during the Reformation and today by many churches who teach double predestination. This view makes God, not man, responsible for the damnation of man. This is not biblical, so Lutherans reject it.

Pelagianism is the false teaching begun by Pelagius, a British monk of the fourth century, who taught that man's nature even after the Fall is incorrupt, therefore, man himself can effect conversion. This is the extreme view which finds the cause of conversion in man. Thus, in essence, this teaching denies the necessity of redemption.

Semi-Pelagianism is a modified form of the teaching of Pelagius which came from the teachings of John Cassian, the Abbot of Massila in southern France. Cassian lived in the fifth century and taught in reaction to the teachings of Pelagius. Cassian taught that original sin is only a blemish on man's nature, similar to a spot on an apple. While the spot may affect the looks of the apple, the apple remains essentially good. Man, according to Cassian, retained essentially good spiritual powers with which he could work out his salvation with the help of God. Semi-Pelagianism became the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church that man makes the beginning in conversion and God completes the work.

Synergism is a more insidious false teaching than semi-Pelagianism because it teaches that original sin is only an external impediment to the good spiritual powers and that there is a little bit of good in even the worst of us. Therefore, when God makes the beginning of conversion, man carries on after that. Fredrick Bente calls Melanchthon the father of Synergism. During Luther's lifetime, Melanchthon spoke of three causes of a good action (Word, Holy Spirit, human will) and after Luther's death publicly advocated the doctrine of

these three concurring causes of conversion.¹¹ Later, John Pfeffinger became the champion of synergistic doctrine.¹²

Monergism is the true teaching of Scripture that our Lutheran confessions call divine monergism or monergism of grace. Monergism teaches that God alone effects conversion and man contributes nothing; that man is purely passive and the object of conversion and that man does not accomplish, but undergoes conversion.

Three of the above false teachings, Pelagianism, semi-Pelagianism, and synergism, view that man can contribute to the conversion which God makes available. The other false teaching, determinism, makes man not responsible for his damnation in hell. The last one, monergism, is the true teaching of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions. This view gives all the glory to God for one's acceptance of God's gracious offer of salvation because it is God alone who effects conversion.¹³ This view is biblical, hence confessional.

Substance (*substantia*) is a synonym of essence in the category of philosophical terms for substance and accident. Melancthon defines it saying, "Substance is something which in reality has a being of its own and is not in another as having its being from the subject."¹⁴ It refers to something which exists without changing its nature or characteristics by something else that is applied to it or acted on it (the accident). For example, if there is a green cup, the cup is the substance (essence) and the color of the cup (white) is the accident.

Accident (*accidens*) is a philosophical term used in the category of substance and accident. Melancthon defines it as "something which does not exist as such nor is a part of the substance, but is changeable in something else Whatever is present or absent without the corruption of the subject is an accident."¹⁵ That means accident is changeable in something else but could not change the substance of the subject or the object in which the accident is found. For example, in the green cup, the cup is the substance or the essence while the color of the cup (green) is the accident. The accident (the color) is the characteristic that can be changed without changing the substance or the essence (the cup).

Corruption is a word that can be defined in two ways. It can mean either the destruction of something which affects the existence of the thing or it can mean the degradation of the quality of something without affecting its existence.¹⁶ Flacius used it in the former sense so that the substance of human nature is changed into something else while Strigel used it in the latter sense so that man can cooperate in his conversion.

The authors of the *Formula of Concord* took the narrow middle road without denying the total corruption of human nature by original sin and without denying that the substance or essence of human nature is not changed or destroyed. They used the word "corruption" to denote that original sin as an accident has corrupted human nature, but not destroyed or changed the substance or essence of human nature. Therefore, it is true to say that original sin

¹¹ Bente, *Introduction to the Lutheran Confessions*, 326-327.

¹² Bente, *Introduction to the Lutheran Confessions*, 330-331.

¹³ Divine Monergism must be strictly distinguished from Determinism which is prominently held by Calvinists. In Divine Monergism, God alone effects conversion (in the narrow sense) and seemingly the paradox is that it makes human beings responsible for their rejection of the Gospel which results in their damnation.

¹⁴ Bente, *Introduction to the Lutheran Confessions*, 346.

¹⁵ Bente, *Introduction to the Lutheran Confessions*, 346.

¹⁶ Bente, *Introduction to the Lutheran Confessions*, 346-47

corrupts human nature in the sense of degrading its quality without destroying it or changing it. But it is false to say that original sin corrupts human nature in the sense of destroying it or changing it, or to say that original sin replaces human nature because the human nature still exists, having the same essence (substance) even after the Fall.

Brief Description of the Historical Context and Theological Controversies

Article I of the *Formula of Concord* on “Original Sin” presents the true teachings and the false teachings to resolve the intense theological controversy over the true nature of man after the Fall into sin. The status of the controversy between 1560-1575 included one group of theologians, Gnesio-Lutherans (true Lutherans), led by Matthias Flacius, who believed that man in his essence or substance is sinful. The other group of theologians, Philippists or Crypto-Calvinists, led by Viktorin Strigel, denied the doctrine of the total corruption of man’s will and believed that original sin is an accident that plagues man, but is not man’s very essence or substance. Article I resolved the dispute by maintaining that original sin is not essentially or substantially part of man, but a “spiritual poison and leprosy.” It also maintains that this condition of man is from conception, not according to the creation, but the Fall.

Article II of the *Formula of Concord* on “Free Will” presents the true teachings and the false teachings to resolve the theological controversy which chronologically preceded the issues surrounding original sin. The status of the controversy between 1555-1560 included a group of theologians who taught that man by his own natural power could cooperate in his conversion, while another group of theologians argued that God alone makes the unregenerated soul regenerated. This historical argument led to the controversy about original sin because the proper understanding of original sin determines the proper outcome of free will. Article II resolved the dispute by maintaining that while man has free will in worldly matters, because of original sin, man has no freedom to help himself in spiritual matters like conversion.

Detailed Description of the Historical Context of the Theological Controversies

Two groups of theologians were debating for a total of twenty years (1555-1575) over the Flacian controversy on original sin and the synergistic controversy on free will. On the one side of the debate were Matthias Flacius and his followers, who strongly believed that they were the ones who were standing on the teachings of Martin Luther. They strongly opposed Philip Melanchthon and his followers.

Flacius became involved in the controversy over original sin as a direct consequence of his previous involvement in the adiaphoristic controversy and the synergistic controversy. The adiaphoristic controversy began when Philip Melanchthon in 1548 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 in turn would tolerate the true doctrine which Lutherans teach. It was sad that the Leipzig Interim indirectly admitted the semi-Pelagian teaching regarding original sin and the freedom of human will. Flacius made the right decision in opposing the adoption of the Leipzig Interim and in instigating the controversy over original sin and the freedom of human will.

On the other side of the debate was Viktorin Strigel, one of the men from the Philippist party, who denied the doctrine of the total corruption of human will, which he debated with Flacius

and which was resolved in Article II. Flacius and Strigel were debating whether or not man cooperates with God in his conversion and to what extent man exerts his will in the process of conversion. Strigel denied the view that original sin completely corrupted human will, i.e., his ability to choose between good and evil in spiritual matters. Instead, he accepted the semi-Pelagianist or synergistic view, i.e., that man somehow cooperates with God when God calls someone to come to God, someone who is willing or open to receiving God.

Flacius opposed Strigel's semi-Pelagian or synergistic view. Flacius followed what Martin Luther rightly thought until the theological controversy became intense. In the heated public debate Flacius unfortunately went too far and overstated his case using unguarded, extreme, and inadequate expressions which are found in his writings. For example, he said about the effect of original sin that man is "transformed into the image of Satan" and that by original sin "the substance of man is destroyed," that after the Fall "original sin is the substance of man," that "man's nature is identical with sin," and that in conversion "a new substance is created by God."¹⁷ In fact, Flacius used the expression "substance of man" to mean the "essence of man." While he believed what the Bible says, that man is created in the image of God, Flacius erred when he said that because of the effect of original sin, after the Fall human nature is "transformed into the image of Satan." Even using his distinction of the material substance and formal substance, Flacius said that Satan has robbed man of his original form, the image of God, and stamped man with his own diabolical form and nature.¹⁸ This is a false conclusion because human nature remains human nature even after the Fall. And Flacius' statements concerning the substantiality of original sin gave rise to the so-called Flacian controversy over original sin.

Flacius, who was so zealous and committed to the truth of the Reformation, got into trouble when he interpreted Scripture in the light of philosophy¹⁹ rather than in the light of the Scripture itself, because philosophy is highly based on human reason which is flawed and subject to error, but God's Word is inerrant (perfect or without error). Flacius was a man who had the right intentions but used the wrong weapon (reason or philosophy) to defeat the doctrinal error of Strigel, which for Flacius was the devil's lie. Human reason could not conquer Satan and all of his wicked lies. The Word of God, the sword of the Spirit alone, as mentioned in 2 Cor. 10:3–5 is able to demolish the stronghold of Satan, to convince people of the truth, and to convert unbelievers to belief.

Flacius tried to appeal to Martin Luther. He said that he was not saying anything different from what Martin Luther said because Martin Luther said "sin and sinning are the disposition and nature of corrupt man." Based on this statement of Luther, Flacius said that sin is the nature of man. And he got into trouble when he used literary terms denoting substance, which the Bible and Luther employ in a figurative sense.²⁰ For example, Luther said that it is the nature of a snake to bite and poison, which does not mean that the snake is equal to poison or poison is equal to snake or biting is equal to snake. These are what a snake does naturally, i.e., to bite people and poison them, that is its nature. Likewise, when Luther says that sin is the nature of man, "nature" means an inclination that comes naturally, i.e., to sin. But that does not mean sin is equal to the nature of man.

¹⁷ Bente, *Introduction to the Lutheran Confessions*, 344

¹⁸ Bente, *Introduction to the Lutheran Confessions*, 347

¹⁹ For so many hundred years before Martin Luther, theologians in the Catholic Church, especially the scholastic school, interpreted Scripture in the light of Greek philosophy (Aristotle 384BC-322BC) and others.

²⁰ Bente, *Introduction to the Lutheran Confessions*, 344.

And based on the philosophical definition of substance and accident, Philip Melanchthon said that “whatever is present or absent without the corruption of the subject is an accident.” Given this definition, just as in the example of the color of the cup (the accident), the cup is still a cup. The accident (the color) could not corrupt or change the substance (the cup). But when Melanchthon used the word “corruption,” which can mean two different things — the destruction of something or the degradation of something — he favored the meaning of corruption in the sense of degradation, which supports his and his followers’ semi-Pelagian and synergistic views.

On the contrary, Flacius favored the meaning of corruption in the sense of destruction, which led him and his followers to the false teaching that original sin is the substance of human nature, and the image of human nature is changed to the image of Satan. This led to the Flacian controversy. In the controversy, Flacius continued to fall into the one extreme ditch by overemphasizing original sin and confounding the scholastic terms carelessly and refusing to admit his errors and correct them. He affirmed and asserted with clear words that original sin is both the substance (form) and accident (quality) of man. Strigel fell into the other extreme of the ditch by neglecting the damage original sin had in man and the faculties of the soul. He argued that man has free will to cooperate in conversion, i.e., during rebirth or regeneration (narrow sense).²¹

Unintended Consequences of Flacius’ Teaching on Original Sin

If original sin is the substance or essence of human nature, there are five unintended consequences:

1. There will be no natural knowledge of God’s existence, which contradicts Rom 1:9.
2. There would be no natural law written on man’s conscience, which contradicts Rom 2:15.
3. The human nature of Jesus would be questioned because Scripture teaches us that he was born without original sin (Heb 4:15) and he did no sin (1 Pet 2:22).
4. This makes Satan as powerful as God (Manichaeism). Manichaeism teaches that God created people with a good nature and Satan, who is the evil god, counteracted that by putting sin into humanity.
5. This makes God the creator of sin when he creates the human nature of each person.

The Characteristics and Danger of False Teaching

Just as every false teaching introduced into the church does, false views with regard to original sin and man’s part in conversion lead to an injection of work-righteousness into the chief doctrine and central teaching of Scripture, the doctrine of justification, the doctrine by which the Church either stands or falls.²² That is one of the reasons why faithful students of Scripture and servants of the Word should not tolerate false teaching.

False teaching drifts so slowly and imperceptibly because there is nothing new under the sun and because false teaching seems more logical in its presentation than the clear teaching of the Scripture. Satan deceives men of all ages that man can in some way, be it ever so small,

²¹ Vogel. “The Flacian Controversy on Original Sin,” 2.

²² Lange, “Free Will and Conversion,” 1.

contribute to his conversion, and hence, to his salvation. This led to many controversies, like Majorism and synergism, which deny the scriptural principle of justification by “grace alone.”²³

Confessional Lutheran Evaluation of the Modern Evangelicals

Followers of many New Wesleyan Arminians (including many Evangelicals) and Eastern churches deny the doctrines of total depravity and original sin, either by degree or in their entirety. Some of their denial of the scriptural teaching on total depravity and original sin are as follow:

Denial of Fundamental Biblical Teaching: When they teach that man contributes to or cooperates in his conversion (regeneration), the chief doctrine of the Scripture— justification by grace alone— is denied. And the means of grace (the Word of God, Baptism, and the Lord’s Supper), which the Holy Spirit uses to create faith and effect conversion (regeneration) in the unregenerate, are misinterpreted. Satan always aims at working for this to happen and when the Christian Church fails to guard the fundamental biblical teachings, he gets the chance to destroy it.

Promoting Decision Theology: Most promoters of this theology fall into the category of semi-Pelagianism or synergism. Not only do they make faith a work that man does, but also they teach a conditional Gospel and ascribe to unconverted man a work he is incapable of doing and not disposed to do. When someone attributes to man the power to invite Christ into his heart, he is ascribing to unregenerate man a power he does not have, which is illogical. If the man is indeed able to respond positively to spiritual matters, he is already regenerated. Therefore, if he claims contribution, he is robbing God of his glory, one of the characteristics of false teaching. This can also mean confusing justification (the one-time event) with sanctification (the process which follows justification). The unregenerate cannot seek God, open the door of his life and receive Christ as his personal Savior. Only the Holy Spirit using the Gospel in Word and sacraments quickens the unregenerated (the spiritually dead) to receive the gift of faith and salvation in its entirety (Rom 6:23, Eph 2:8–9, Gal 3:2). They receive the Holy Spirit by the hearing of faith. The word “hearing” in the Greek can refer either to the thing you hear or simply to hearing. As one person put it: “The heard message of faith gives not only the message of Christ, it gives the hearing of faith to receive the message. The ‘message of faith’ is ‘the message which brings faith’.”²⁴ It is God the Holy Spirit who gives the gift of faith for the salvation of man and man is purely passive and God does everything.

Denial of Infant Baptism and the Salvific Nature of Baptism: Churches that follow Anabaptist and Baptist doctrines deny the doctrine of total depravity and original sin, therefore they deny the need for infant baptism and the salvific nature of baptism. They deny that baptism forgives sins and effects regeneration or new birth to the baptized. For Anabaptists, sanctification took precedence over justification. For them baptism is the “covenant of a good conscience toward God” (1 Pet 3:21), the pledge of a complete commitment to obey Christ. They also deny the practice of infant baptism and insist upon the rebaptism of those baptized in infancy because they believe that the validity of baptism depends on the ability to profess Christian faith. One of their favorite theologians, Wayne

²³ Lange, “Free Will and Conversion,” 1-2.

²⁴ Frederick Dale Brunner, *A Theology of The Holy Spirit*. (Eerdmans, 1970), p 245.

Grudem, who also perceives baptism as a “minor” doctrine, mentioned that “baptism is not a ‘major’ doctrine that should be the basis of division among genuine Christians, but it is nonetheless a matter of importance for ordinary church life, and it is appropriate that we give it full consideration.”²⁵ When the sacraments are robbed of their gospel content, they no longer inspire the same passions among those to whom they have been given. Furthermore, it is sad to see that the focus of many believers turned less and less to the objective promises of God in Word and sacraments, and more and more to the subjective evidence of God’s work in the life of the believer.²⁶

Adoption of Perfect or Complete Sanctification: This is the heresy of the Holiness Movement and Pentecostalism which grew out of the answer for the question: “How can we be sure that our churches are made up of people who have all been converted?” They erred because they seek the answer in the subjective evidence of God’s work in the life of the believer rather than in the means of grace. Whereas Scripture directs those who desire the Holy Spirit in their lives to the Word and sacraments through which they receive forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation, followers of the Holiness Movement and Pentecostalism desire perfect or complete sanctification, which man cannot not attain while he lives in this world. That is denying the existence of the effect of original sin in their life, concupiscence. Concupiscence is the inclination of the thought of all the heart of man (Gen 6:3, Jer 17:9). This false teaching denies the reality that a Christian is *simul justus et peccator*, “sinner and righteous at the same time.” That means the Christian by his own is completely sinner and at the same time, because of what Christ has already done for him, he is completely righteous.

Confessional Lutheran Teaching on Original Sin and Free Will

The Formula of Concord to which faithful Lutherans subscribe states: “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 inconsiderable part, but entirely, solely, to the divine working and the Holy Ghost.”²⁷ This is a beautiful summation of Scriptural truth. Man is not converted, not saved by his own actions. Scripture talks of man as being the object of conversion. Conversion is something done to man (Phil 1:29; John 6:44, and Matt 16:17).

Only the Holy Spirit can give faith (1Cor 12:3). The congregation at Corinth had overemphasized the importance of certain spiritual gifts. Paul states that whoever believes in Christ has the supreme gift of the Holy Spirit, i.e., faith in Christ. No man is able to believe in Jesus unless it is through the operation of the Holy Spirit. Man is born spiritually blind. God the Holy Spirit alone can give spiritual sight by enlightening the unregenerated (1Cor 2:9–10).

Natural man is spiritually dead at birth. He must be born again. Only the Holy Spirit can work this new birth (John 3:5). The spiritual corpse must be given spiritual life; it must be quickened. Only the Holy Spirit can do that (Eph 2:5). Also, man is born an enemy of God. He must be converted, turned around, made a lover of God (Matt 18:3). And it is the Holy Spirit who converts, enlightens, makes spiritually alive, and gives spiritual life to man. Man is unable by his own natural powers to help the Holy Spirit in even the slightest way.

²⁵ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 967.

²⁶ John A. Vieth. “The Church Encounters Attacks on Holy Baptism,” 8.

²⁷ *Formula of Concord*, Thorough Declaration, p. 891, Art. II, par. 1, Triglotta.

It should be pointed out that conversion (regeneration) is not a process, a matter of stages. Man is either a believer or an unbeliever. There is no intermediate state. Man is either converted or unconverted. He either possesses through faith the forgiveness Christ won for him, or he loses the benefit of the forgiveness Christ won for him by unbelief (John 3:18).

The Holy Spirit alone converts and he converts through means of grace: the Gospel in Word and the sacraments. It is true that the Gospel demands faith (Mark 16:16). Yet only the Holy Spirit through the Gospel can supply what God demands, namely, faith, and open the door of man's heart to Christ (Rev 3:20). Thus, only the Holy Spirit converts through the Gospel.

The Gospel saves through faith (belief) which can only come from hearing the message, the Word of Christ, the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes (1Cor 1:21, Rom 10:17, Rom. 1:16). Through the message of the Gospel, the Holy Spirit gives the gift of faith which the message demands.

Faith is not a work of man. It is not an act performed by his own natural powers, as the "decision for Christ" people indicate. Faith is a gift from the Holy Spirit, as salvation in its entirety is "a gift of God" (Rom 6:23). Faith is created in man's heart through the Gospel by the Holy Spirit (Eph 2:8-9). It is noteworthy that "decision for Christ" people will quote this passage and then turn around and describe faith as an act or work of man's natural powers. Paul disposed of this idea by reaffirming that man receives the Spirit by the hearing of faith, not by the works of the law (Gal 3:2).

Through the Gospel in Word and sacraments, God the Holy Spirit effects conversion. The Lutheran confessions reecho this truth when they state: "So also when Luther says that with respect to his conversion man is purely passive, that is, does nothing whatever towards it, but only suffers what God works in him, his meaning is not that conversion takes place without the preaching and hearing of God's Word; nor is this his meaning that in conversion no new emotion whatever is awakened in us by the Holy Ghost and no spiritual operation begun; but he means that man of himself, or from his natural powers, cannot do anything or help towards his conversion, and that conversion is not only in part, but altogether an operation, gift, and 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."²⁸

With scriptural proof from Romans 5:12 and 1 John 3:7, the Formula of Concord affirms this, saying, "God is not a creator, author, or cause of sin.... God at the present day still creates and makes the human nature in people." This two-part comment helps us define original sin as an accident to human nature which the devil instigated through one man, rather than as the substance of human nature which God still creates and makes in man.²⁹

The Formula of Concord affirms that more than "lack of righteousness," original sin is also "a deep, wicked, horrible, fathomless, mysterious, and unspeakable corruption of the entire human nature and all its powers." This truth deepens our sadness in hearing that while Adam was created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26-27), the Scriptures say that, after the Fall, Adam's children were born in the likeness of Adam (Genesis 5:3). This proves that nothing in us was left uncorrupted and that we lost our ability and fitness for spiritual matters

²⁸ Formula of Concord, Thorough Declaration, p. 915, par. 8-9, Triglotta.

²⁹ FC SD I:7

before God and became his enemies and weak even in external things, which are subject to reason.³⁰

In light of the scriptural truth, confessional Lutherans see human nature through “bifocals” which have two lenses — the one “lens” being God’s creation, the second “lens” being man’s fall. It is important to note from the Scripture that whenever negative statements concerning human nature are mentioned, most often the lens used is man’s fall because God’s creation is perfect and because he is not the creator of sin and evil.³¹ The Savior from sin we utterly need is not only true man, with the same substance of Adam except the accident (original sin) which the devil instigated in Adam. But for the Savior to be our perfect substitute in life and death he must also be true God, in the likeness of God, who can understand our needs and meet them completely to save us.³²

The great and horrible nature of the hereditary evil, original sin,³³ is so deep that only Christ’s death “declares” us righteous or “makes” us righteous. The “courtroom language” of justification which uses the verb “declare” helps us understand that even after Christ’s death, we must still confess, saying, “I, a poor miserable sinner,” which also helps us better understand what we might expect to read in Luther’s *Bondage of the Will*.

The distinction of the “four unique conditions”³⁴ of the human will — 1) before the Fall, 2) after the Fall, 3) after new birth and 4) after the resurrection of the flesh— is extremely important to remember because the controversy is on the second unique condition, i.e., about the unregenerated becoming regenerated, not about those who are already regenerate. The failure to consider that important context leads people to erroneously think that the regenerate man (New Adam) does not cooperate or is not expected to cooperate or cannot cooperate in the baptismal life of sanctification. The truth is that the regenerated are expected to or can cooperate in this baptismal life of sanctification.

The Solid Declaration and many Bible passages³⁵ referenced in article 2, paragraphs 48-73³⁶ show that man has no free will to come to faith, nor is man’s heart “neutral” before conversion. Furthermore, they show that the unregenerate is converted through the Holy Spirit’s use of the Word and baptism. For example, paragraph 48 points that “the Holy Spirit desires to be active in us and effect true repentance, faith, and the new spiritual power and capability to do the good in our hearts; and how we should respond to such means and use them.” These evidences teach us to beware of the teachings of those who want us to “choose Jesus” or those who ask about “the moment when a human being makes a decision for Jesus” or those who claim that a human being can come to faith through some other means,³⁷ other than the Word of God and the sacraments of Holy Baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

³⁰ FC SD 1:10-12

³¹ Ephesians 2:3 “... by nature children of wrath.” Here Paul used the lens of man’s fall, not God’s creation.

³² Rom 5:12–21

³³ FC SD II:14

³⁴ FC SD II:2

³⁵ Some of the Bible passages are Ezek. 33:11; John 3:16; 1Cor. 1:21; Acts 10:5-6; Rom. 10:17; John 17:17; Matt. 17:5; Gal. 4:6; 2 Cor. 2:14ff; 3:5ff; Matt. 23:37; Acts 7:51; Psa. 51:10; Eph. 2:5; Rom. 7:22; 8:14; Psa. 110:4; Rom. 7:22f, 25; Gal. 5:17; 2 Cor. 6:1; 1 Cor. 3:9, 15:10; 2 Cor. 6:16; Gal. 3:27; John 8:36; 1 Cor. 2:14; 2Cor. 3:5.

³⁶ FC SD II:48-73 gives a detailed explanation of how the unregenerate is converted through the Holy Spirit’s use of Word and baptism.

³⁷ Some of the examples of those other means are a walk through the woods, dreams, visions, the unregenerated spontaneous experiences of singing songs, a feeling in the heart, powerful music.

The *Formula of Concord* points out that the corruption in divine things and remaining an enemy of God³⁸ is echoed in the other confessions in the Book of Concord, especially in Luther's Small Catechism. The explanation of the third article of the Apostles' Creed reads: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, nor come to Him, but the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified, and kept me in the true faith; in like manner as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith."³⁹

Conclusion

As Professor Daniel Deutschlander suggests,⁴⁰ the narrow road which confessional Lutherans follow continues to be unique since the early stages of the Reformation and helps to avoid both the ditches of Arminianism (synergism and semi-Pelagianism) and Calvinism (Determinism). This road, which the authors of the Formula of Concord employed, saves us from violating the principle of *Sola Scriptura*, Scripture Alone,⁴¹ which many churches violated. It also helps us to continue standing firm and teaching the sound doctrine faithfully because the most effective way of fighting false teaching is teaching the truth of Scripture as faithfully expounded in the Book of Concord of 1580.

The truth of God's Word unites us (CELC member churches) and encourages us to remain in our fellowship, to work together for the truth, and to regard his Word and the sacraments highly and to praise him for his rich and varied blessings through confessional Lutherans past and present.

Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions clearly teach that the corruption human beings faced because of the Fall is so deep that no human reason understands except that God in his Word explain it. It is not as simple as the *Tsemay* people and Christians in the modern day think or believe, and it is not a reality which human beings dare deny and shift the blame to God the Creator or to another creature (the snake) or to our first parents (Adam and Eve). Often, human beings run into a problem when they listen to the seemingly convincing voices of reason and emotion, which the devil uses to destroy our relationship with God, rather than listening to God's Word alone, the only sound voice, which keeps everything right with God.

It is important to note again that faithful students of Scripture and servants of the Word preach the Word of God to "convict" with the Word itself rather than to "convince" using logical reasoning. When churches preach the Gospel to "convince" people of its goodness, this implies that the will of the unregenerated is free, not bound, and that is a great false teaching.

³⁸ FC SD II:5

³⁹ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 355.

⁴⁰ Deutschlander, *The Narrow Lutheran Middle: Following the Scriptural Road*, 1-2. In religion and theology there is something of a search for the middle between two false alternatives, between an overemphasis on some aspect of a truth at the expense of the rest of the truth. False doctrines are the result of falls off the narrow middle road into ditches on either side of the truth in the middle.

The biblical doctrine on original sin and free will preserves doctrines intertwined with the fundamental doctrines of Christianity. Man is saved or justified by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ. And the Scripture is the only source of true doctrine. It also helps the Church better know and extoll the benefits of the Lord Christ and his precious merit, and the gracious operation of the Holy Spirit, and to render due honor to God by rightly distinguishing his work and creation in man from the work of the devil by which the nature has been corrupted.⁴²

This study also reminds us to carefully use terms in their correct context because writers of the Scripture also use different terms to communicate the same message. For example, as Deutschlander noted, in 1 Thess 2:3, Paul warns against a false teacher called the “man of sin” (KJV) or the “man of lawlessness” (NIV). In 1 John 4:3, John calls this same false teacher the “Anti-Christ.” Even though they used different names for this false teacher, Paul and John agreed on the doctrine concerning his coming.⁴³ While it is desirable to agree on using common terminology to avoid confusing people, whenever the need arises to use different terminologies to communicate the same message it is important to use the terminologies with the correct understanding in context. When we do this, the devil will not get the chance to destroy us by our careless use of terminologies just as he did with Adam and Eve, and Flacius. Such careful use of terms and proper explanation helps to preserve our fellowship in the CELC and to extend it to others carefully.

Finally, let’s continue remembering the motto of the Reformation and praying: God safeguard us in the sound scriptural teaching of original sin, our inability to aid in our conversion, and therefore our utter dependency on our God who “being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.” (Ephesians 2:4–5) Indeed, he has made us alive “according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior.” (Titus 3:5-6)

⁴² FC SD I:3-4

⁴³ Deutschlander, *Church Fellowship*, 36-37.

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