

*The Continuing Relevance of the Formula of Concord:  
A Look at Behavioral Genetics and the Flacian Controversy*

Geoff Cortright  
Church History 3038  
Prof. Alan Siggelkow  
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Rev. Dr. Mel White would like nothing more than to be able to walk into a Lutheran pulpit and be able to proclaim to people the Bible and its proclamation of love. The problem for Dr. White is that so many Lutheran churches in his view are not reading Scripture correctly and still have prejudiced, intolerant views against his homosexual lifestyle. As an outspoken proponent of Soulforce, an organization for the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Christians [GLBT], he is frustrated that so many Christians do not accept that he is following the “sexual standards pleasing to God” in his monogamous homosexual relationship.<sup>1</sup> In Dr. White’s view, he is simply following the natural desires that God has placed in him, in his genetic composition, the predisposition to homosexuality.

In fact, there is a growing voice in the field of behavioral genetics that suggests people may be predisposed by their genes towards a variety of notable characteristics and tendencies, such as personality traits, intelligence, sexual orientation, even things like alcoholism, novelty seeking, or shyness. They are giving rise to a notion that “it’s all in the genes;” in other words, Dr. White should not be criticized for doing what is natural to him. By the same measure, Glenda Sue Cardwell, a woman with Huntington’s disease, a genetic disorder, who shot and killed her daughter in 1986, should not be held responsible. In 1993 Judge Kenneth Kilpatrick released her from prison after it was discovered that she had a genetic predisposition to violent behavior associated with Huntington’s disease.<sup>2</sup> The courts ruled in a landmark decision that genetics released her from criminal responsibility. The question this issue raises, does God? If God creates people with a genetic code that predisposes them to illnesses, personality traits, or especially a sexual orientation that goes against his Word, can he hold them morally responsible for what is essentially their genetic make-up? Can God blame people for doing what is in their very nature to do?

While churches like the ELCA argue and debate the issue of genetics in behavior as they pertain to God’s law, we turn back to see that it is really a modern “scientific” approach to a

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<sup>1</sup> White, Mel. “What the Bible Says—and Doesn’t Say about Homosexuality” *Soulforce.org*. <[www.soulforce.org](http://www.soulforce.org)>. 22 November 2007. p 14.

<sup>2</sup> Peters, Ted. “My genes made me do it!” *The Lutheran*. Vol 8, Num 3. March 1995. p 25.

controversy raised already in the time of the post-Reformation. Flacius brought about the same debate when he said that original sin after the fall into sin is essential to human nature. In the heat of debate, Flacius overstated his case against Victorinus Strigel, to defend the Lutheran teaching against synergism. Strigel asked Flacius, “Do you deny that original sin is a quality (*accidens*)?”<sup>3</sup> To this direct question Flacius replied, “Luther clearly denies that it is a quality (*accidens*).”<sup>4</sup> Flacius through this debate with Strigel gave rise to the controversy named for him. Flacius adamantly denied that because original sin is part of the essence of man, God must have been the author of evil. However, some of his supporters took Flacius’ teaching on original sin to the next logical extension – God must be the author of evil, if original sin is part of the essence of human beings. Modern day genetic behaviorism allows for people to present the same argument: “It can’t be my fault if God made me this way.”

To understand what Flacius meant, we really need to understand the context in which he made his infamous statement. The entire controversy surrounded his person. Flacius was born Matthias Flacius Illyricus in 1520 in Illyria, part of modern day Croatia. After his father died at a young age, Flacius traveled to Venice and later to Basel, Tübingen, and then finally Wittenberg to gain an education and calm his troubled conscience. In Wittenberg, Flacius became a professor of Hebrew in 1544. However, when Melanchthon tried to introduce the Leipzig Interim in 1548, Flacius quickly became an outspoken opponent of the Philippist party (supporters of Melanchthon and compromising Lutheran doctrine for peace). He left Wittenberg in 1549 and moved to Magdeburg where he opposed Melanchthon vehemently during the Adiaphoristic controversy and later during the Synergistic controversy.

In 1555, the Synergistic controversy broke out when John Pfeffinger took the ideas of Melanchthon too far saying that man must contribute his share in conversion, be that contribution ever so small. Flacius opposed Pfeffinger, Melanchthon and the rest with his *Book of Confutations*. In

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid.* p 31.

<sup>4</sup> Victorinus Strigel quoted in Vogel, Heinrich J. “The Flacian Controversy on Original Sin.” *No Other Gospel*. Northwestern Publishing House, 1980. <[www.wlssays.net](http://www.wlssays.net)>. 10 December 2007, p 4.

defense of the Wittenberg position held by Pfeffinger and Melancthon, Strigel took up the Synergists cause, only to find himself arrested by Duke John Frederick and imprisoned.<sup>5</sup> Upon his release Flacius and Strigel agreed to a debate in Weimar in August of 1560, in which he made his infamous statement calling original sin the “substance” (*substantia*) of man. Strigel argued using philosophical sophisms that man has free will as an essential part of himself, which has not been destroyed by the fall into sin. He was trying to minimize original sin as merely an *accidens* (an accidental property or quality – both of which mean that original sin is an incidental property of human nature).<sup>6</sup>

While Strigel was correct in suggesting that original sin is not a quality, or accidental property, of human nature, his line of reasoning had backed Flacius into a corner. In the response, Flacius went too far in his failed attempt to preserve the teaching of total depravity in original sin; he called original sin *substantia*. Professor Vogel defines it this way: “Substance (*substantia*) is something which in reality has a being of its own and is not in another as having its being from the subject.”<sup>7</sup> By calling original sin *substantia*, “substance” or “essence”—Flacius was suggesting with the use of the terms that human nature cannot exist without original sin.

While Flacius was trying to avoid any opportunity to allow room for man to contribute a role in conversion, he unfortunately strayed too far in the other direction, equating the effects of original sin on human nature with the corrupted human nature itself.<sup>8</sup> Flacius sums up his argument in this way: “We were formerly, in the first creation, something very good, both as to attributes (*accidentalibus*) and as to substance (*substantia*). Later we were changed essentially (*essentialiter*) into something very bad as to its substance (*substantia sua*), as when the best wine were changed into the sourest vinegar.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Bente, Friedrich. “Historical Introductions to the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.” *Concordia Triglotta*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921. p 134.

<sup>6</sup> Siggelkow, Alan. “CH 3038 Class Notes 2007). Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Vogel, p 7. *Substantia est ens, quod revera proprium esse habet, nec est in alio, ut habens esse a subiecto.*

<sup>8</sup> Vogel, p 12.

<sup>9</sup> Matthias Flacius Illyricus, quoted in Vogel, p 12.

Flacius opened the door to an attack on God's creation by calling original sin a substance. His opponents accused him of suggesting that God created evil, if original sin is a part of human nature itself. Moreover, people could attack Christ's true humanity—for Christ had no original sin. By syllogism Flacius was saying Christ had a nature of a different substance than all other human beings, putting the validity of his atoning work into question.

It is here to this point that our present matter enters. The growing concept of genetic essentialism, or genetic determinism as it is called, suggests that genes play a greater role in our human nature than determining our physical features and health. A recent ELCA study on bioethics argues, "Genetic knowledge is increasingly used, and misused, to explain human behavior, and it is impossible to ignore its impact upon our understanding of human nature."<sup>10</sup> Scientists William Clark and Michael Grunstein argue in their book *Are We Hardwired?* that "if we humans do not possess pre-soldered circuits that determine our daily actions, we nonetheless each have neurological 'wiring' whose characteristics strongly influence those actions. And genes clearly play a central role in both how that system comes into being and how it works."<sup>11</sup> The debate ultimately comes down to one of "nature vs. nurture"—long debated in branches of psychology.

Scientists seem to agree that genes do play a role in our inherited characteristics and propensities towards things like substance abuse. The question is *how much* do they play a role? Using a series of twin studies, especially twins separated by birth, scientists have so far claimed that inherited characteristics such as assertiveness, altruism, or extroversion correlate in the twins between 39 to 58 percent of the time, and intelligence factors at about 50 percent.<sup>12</sup> This means that in measurable characteristics, twins separated at birth and raised in different environments possess about half the

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<sup>10</sup> Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. "Genes and Human Behavior." *Genetics! Where Do We Stand as Christians?*. <[www.elca.org](http://www.elca.org)>. 28 November 2007. p 34.

<sup>11</sup> Benderly Beryl Lief. Reivew of "Are We Hardwired?: The Role of Genes in Human Behavior." *Genome News Network*. <[www.genomeneetwork.org/articles/11\\_00/Hardwired\\_review.php](http://www.genomeneetwork.org/articles/11_00/Hardwired_review.php)> 16 December 2007.

<sup>12</sup> "Genes and Human Behavior." p 35.

same features recognizable in their opposite twin. Scientists who support these findings say that if you have a desire to be in the outdoors, it may just be because you have the “outdoor gene.” If you are a thrill seeker, looking for your next big rush, be it jumping out of a plane or snorting crack, you may have the “thrill gene.”

However, not all scientists agree on the extent genes play in our human nature. The environment, (sociologists define “environment” as nearly any surrounding influence upon our lives, such as symbolic communication and cultural values, basic influences such as family and childrearing patterns, social structure, technology, etc.) must also play some role.<sup>13</sup> Some environments actively bring out a particular characteristic. For example, a boy growing up in a home without his father’s presence may find his “rebel gene” brought to the fore and developed. Whereas the same boy in a stable home, may learn to control his rebellious tendency in positive ways. Genes that influence behavior are “turned on” or suppressed on the basis of environmental influences and stressors.<sup>14</sup> In the same way scientists say, “...genotype *underdetermines* phenotype...[that is] a person’s genetic inheritance (genotype) plays a recognizable role, but does not determine the observable consequences (phenotype).”<sup>15</sup> In other words, predispositions do exist, but they do not predetermine what a person will do. The best researchers claim on the bottom line that the role between genes and environment is a “two-way street.”<sup>16</sup>

Clearly the implications of behavioral genetics in understanding human nature reflect on the popular understanding of moral responsibility in mainstream Christianity today. In liberal theology where religion is frequently updated or revised to reflect current scientific thought, we have to wonder how far genetics will undermine the doctrine of original sin. According to liberal thought, if faulty

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<sup>13</sup> Benderly.

<sup>14</sup> “Genes and Human Behavior.” p 36.

<sup>15</sup> “Genes and Human Behavior.” p 36.

<sup>16</sup> “Genes and Human Behavior.” p 36.

genes push me to sin, (genetic determinism – genes determine my propensities to action), is it not God’s fault for making me as an imperfect creature? If I examine my sin and see that I have sinned by following my natural propensities (genetic essentialism – whatever is essentially human can be reduced to the genes), is that again not God’s fault for designing me this way?<sup>17</sup>

In our culture and climate today, homosexuality stands out as a prime example. Armed with the support of agencies like the American Psychological Association, the National Education Administration, and the Interfaith Alliance Foundation, among others, have taken a stand that “homosexuality is not a mental disorder and thus there is no need for a cure.”<sup>18</sup> In fact sociologists warn that it is “harmful” to attempt “reparative therapy,” or any attempt to eliminate homosexual desires by people considering it to be abnormal or a mental disorder.<sup>19</sup> In 2005 these sociological/psychological findings found their way into the ELCA synodical convention, where the ELCA passed a resolution to seek new ways to minister to people in same-sex relationships and to further the continued study whether to accept clergy who are practicing in an open same-sex relationship.<sup>20</sup> On the basis of scientific studies and personal experience, they argue (with support of much of the clergy) that Scripture does not condemn “same-gender sexual activity [by] homosexual people who are in committed relationships.”<sup>21</sup> Even though the resolution failed in 2005 to permit clergy to be practicing open homosexuals, the resolution is slated to be re-addressed in 2009. Men like Dr. White support such actions along similar lines of reasoning,

The Bible is completely silent on the issue of homosexual orientation. And no wonder. Homosexual orientation wasn’t even known until the 19th century. The discovery that some of us are created and/or shaped in our earliest infancy toward same-gender attraction was made in the last 150 years. Biblical authors knew nothing about sexual orientation. Old Testament authors and Paul assumed all people were

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<sup>17</sup> “Genes and Human Behavior.” p 36.

<sup>18</sup> Committee on Lesbian, Gay, & Bisexual Concerns. “Just the Facts About Sexual Orientation & Youth.” APA Online. <[www.apa.org/pi/lgbc/publications/justthefacts.html](http://www.apa.org/pi/lgbc/publications/justthefacts.html)> 15 December 2007. p 3.

<sup>19</sup> “Just the Facts About Sexual Orientation & Youth.” p 3-4.

<sup>20</sup> “ELCA Studies on Sexuality” Recommendation 7.31.18 p 5-6.

<sup>21</sup> “ELCA Studies on Sexuality,” p 4.

created heterosexual, just as they believed the earth was flat, that there were heavens above and hell below, and that the sun moved up and down.<sup>22</sup>

Ultimately the movement to accept all forms of sexual orientation in ELCA stems from a behavioral genetics point of view, which says “there are those in this church who believe that homosexuality is a condition, not a choice.”<sup>23</sup> This movement in the GLBT community to appeal to scientific reasons appeals also to God as creator of homosexual desires. They address the issue of original sin and the passages of Scripture from an antinomian slant—that if their goal is to overthrow or render the law of God by calling it “out-dated.” They would like us to accept GLBT sexuality as loving in the same way heterosexual marriages are designed by God to be loving. They place the fault or any blame at God’s feet. Here we have a “scientific/medical” way of addressing the same philosophical question: if man has these imperfections deep within himself and he is not the cause of them, they must be part of his substance and therefore God’s work.

Flacius arrives by reason of a philosophical treatment of the human condition at the same conclusion—God is the creator of the sinful nature. Flacius’ error arose because he overstated his case against the synergist Strigel. Genetic behaviorism errs by trying to remove guilt for original sin as proponents appeal “scientifically” to hereditary predispositions. Flacius in his stubborn pride could not see his error might rationally lead people to accept sin as God-pleasing behavior. Genetic behaviorism says these genetic predispositions we consider to be sinful desires to be part of the sum and substance of mankind. From the arguments of Flacius and proponents of behavioral genetics people might be able to conclude, “Since these desires have been shown to be a part of my nature, and I perceive acting on them as loving, therefore God cannot consider them sinful or he would be creating evil in me.”

Just as the Formula of Concord addressed Flacius, it also sheds light on the matter of genetic behaviorism in our own day. We remember the *Formula of Concord*, along with the *Augsburg Confession*

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<sup>22</sup> White, p 18-19.

<sup>23</sup> “ELCA Studies on Sexuality,” p 4. <[www.elca.org/assembly/05/VotingMatters/RecommendationsRelatedtoSexuality.pdf](http://www.elca.org/assembly/05/VotingMatters/RecommendationsRelatedtoSexuality.pdf)> 15 December 2007.

Art XIX, points out, “God is not a creator, author, or cause of sin. Instead, by the instigation of the devil, ‘through one human being, sin’ (which is a work of the devil) ‘came into the world’ (Rom 5:12; 1 John 3:8).”<sup>24</sup> Scripture clearly teaches that God bears no responsibility in causing sin to happen. In the same way, he does not cause people to sin by giving them genetic difficulties to bear. We hear of Paul who carried a “thorn in the flesh,” perhaps a genetic disorder of sorts, that he carried to the glory of Christ. In the same way, God uses human weakness to his glory, “He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him” (1 Cor 1:28,29).

There must remain a distinction between the sinful nature and the essence of a human being. Reducing the essence of a person to his or her genes is tantamount to blaming sin upon genes and saying the sinful actions prompted by genes are the substance of man. Again the *Formula of Concord* says, “Even after the fall God is the creator of human beings and fashions the human body and soul. Therefore, the corrupted human being cannot be sin itself, without any distinction between the two. Otherwise, God would be a creator of sin.”<sup>25</sup>

Secondly, the *Formula of Concord* also affirms as Flacius taught, albeit incorrectly, that original sin corrupts human nature entirely in a way that all actual sins flow from the heart.<sup>26</sup> It is not the essence, nature, or substance of the human being, but it is something so dreadful that it is called the “chief sin.” In saying this, the *Formula of Concord* is teaching that all people are predisposed, inclined towards all kinds of evil. Original sin is the “fountainhead of all actual sins,” as Luther calls it the “person-sin” or “nature-sin.”<sup>27</sup> We should not be surprised if any person finds himself or herself tempted by a sin that all people consider gross and vile. All people have this in-born propensity to sin that leads all of us to

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<sup>24</sup> SD, Art I, 7.

<sup>25</sup> SD, Art I, 38.

<sup>26</sup> SD, Art I, 5.

<sup>27</sup> SD, Art I, 5.

commit actual sins we may think we are incapable of doing. There is a Glenda Sue Cardwell inside each of us; given the right circumstances, we too, could be tempted to kill even the ones we love. However, no propensity or temptation is ever an excuse. “When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin” (James 1:13-15a).

We receive this inborn, original sin from our parents and from our first parents Adam and Eve. Genesis 5:3 makes this point, saying “[Adam] had a son in his own likeness, according to his image,” indicating that human beings passed down this unholy quality from one generation to the next. The *Formula of Concord* makes clear the only correct understanding of this passage: “Ever since the fall, the human being inherits an inborn evil way of doing things, an internal impurity of the heart and an evil desire and inclination.<sup>28</sup> The propensities we inherit from our parents, could be attributed to genetic predispositions, but ultimately they go back to the in-born evil we inherit from Adam and Eve.”

Furthermore, we fully understand from the Formula of Concord that an additional penalty for original sin beyond death and eternal condemnation are “‘other corporeal’ (*leiblich Elend*) and spiritual, temporal and eternal miseries.”<sup>29</sup> These miseries certainly can and do include all the diseases of body and mind that are a sad effect of sin in this life. They also include all sorts of birth defects and genetically caused problems. However, we ought not to consider physical, genetic, or other bodily problems a sign that God either condones sin or punishes people. Jesus reminded his disciples that the man born blind in John 9, was born this way, “that the work of God might be displayed in his life.” Moreover, we understand and believe that these “miseries” or “*leiblich Elend*” come to all believers, “For we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,” (Acts 14:22) Paul says.

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<sup>28</sup> SD, Art I, 11.

<sup>29</sup> SD, Art I, 13.

The struggles that people endure against temptation and sin, perhaps even due to hereditary predispositions, may be very real. Some individuals may really be born with a homosexual gene, or a predisposition to alcoholism. However two problems arise: 1) no one, not even science, can prove that genes cause people to sin; 2) just because a predisposition may make a sinful urge feel natural, this does not therefore make following the urge right. If the genetic hereditary traits we receive from our parents were sinful or the cause of sin, then God would be at fault. People who blame God for their sins which they say are caused by their genetic predispositions 1) are trying to avoid sin and destroy the law, and 2) are using genetics as an excuse to blame God and remove sin and guilt. They call God the author of sin. To this *Formula of Concord* again responds: “For original sin does not come from God. God is not a creator or author of sin.”<sup>30</sup> The result of behavioral genetics is blaming God for bad genes, then turning around to use that as an excuse to sin. Finally we see people using behavioral genetics to arbitrarily call their personal desires “natural,” as in the case of Dr. Mel White, while freely condemning other sins they detest as unnatural.

Instead, the doctrine of original sin, as explained by the *Formula of Concord*, condemns all people equally under the standard of God’s law that none of us can meet. Thus, we see the need for our Savior and find forgiveness and refreshment in him. With Paul, we see our need in Christ, “For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God’s abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ” (Rom 5:17).

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<sup>30</sup> SD Art I, 40

## Questions for Discussion

*This essay probably raises more questions than it necessarily solves. I submit it to your discussion, and to further investigation of issues that it perhaps leaves unanswered.*

1. What other kinds of genetics conditions might people try to use as an excuse to evade responsibility for sin?
  
2. Is there ever a situation where the sinful actions of a person might not incur guilt? For example, a person with a severe case of Tourette's syndrome, a neurological disorder blamed in large measure on genetics, that blurs out obscenities.
  
3. Consider the following excerpt from Dr. Mel White of Soulforce arguing about the meaning of the Greek word ἀρσενικοιτης from 1 Cor 6:9 and 1 Tim 1:10:

As for *arsenokoitai*, Greek scholars don't know exactly what it means—and the fact that we don't know is a big part of this tragic debate. Some scholars believe Paul was coining a name to refer to the customers of “the effeminate call boys.” We might call them “dirty old men.” Others translate the word as “sodomites,” but never explain what that means.

In 1958, for the first time in history, a person translating that mysterious Greek word into English decided it meant *homosexuals*, even though there is, in fact, no such word in Greek or Hebrew. But that translator made the decision for all of us that placed the word *homosexual* in the English-language Bible for the very first time. In the past, people used Paul's writings to support slavery, segregation, and apartheid. Now we have to ask ourselves, “Is it happening again?” Is a word in Greek that has no clear definition being used to reflect society's prejudice and condemn God's gay children?

We all need to look more closely at that mysterious Greek word *arsenokoitai* in its original context. I find most convincing the argument from history that Paul is condemning the married men who hired hairless young boys (*malakoi*) for sexual pleasure just as they hired smooth-skinned young girls for that purpose. Responsible homosexuals would join Paul in condemning anyone who uses children for sex, just as we would join anyone else in condemning the threatened gang rape in Sodom or the behavior of the sex-crazed priests and priestesses in Rome. So, once again, I am convinced that this passage says a lot about God, but nothing about homosexuality as we understand it today.<sup>31</sup>

How do we respond to Dr. White's interpretation claiming homosexuality as we understand it today is not a condition described in Scripture?

How is his line of reasoning also used by others to arbitrarily condone anti-scriptural actions while excluding other actions as sin?

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<sup>31</sup> White, p 18.

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